July 2004

Deep Magic

The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction

Published by Amberlin

Issue 26

Published by The Amberlin Group, LLC.

Staff

Chief Editor - Jeremy Whitted
Managing Editor - Brendon Taylor
Contributing Editor - Jeff Wheeler
Copyediting Manager - JW Wrenn
Technology Geek - Steven Richards
Writing Challenge Editor - Usman Tanveer Malik
Book Reviews Editor - Matthew Scott Winslow
SciFi Book Reviews Editor - Rochelle Buck
Copyeditor - Mark Reeder
Copyeditor - Scott Clements
Copyeditor - Keri Stevenson

Submissions Review - All Editors

Graphic Design - Jeremy Whitted
Art Director - Jeff Wheeler
Associate Art Director - Reuben Fox

Marketing - Jeff Wheeler
Legal - Brendon Taylor

We would like to thank our volunteer proofreaders:
A. M. Stickel
Isaac Nydegger
L. D. Reece
Mike Loos

Website: http://www.deep-magic.net

Feedback: http://www.deep-magic.net/contact

Forums: http://www.deep-magic.net/forums

Cover by Vincent Di Fate
"The Good Stuff"

Deep Magic strives to produce and publish morally responsible art and literature. Although great effort has been made to refer our readers to like-minded websites, Deep Magic is not capable of controlling the content in other sites linked to or referenced herein. Thus, Deep Magic encourages its readers to use their own discretion when visiting other sites identified on our site or in Deep Magic: The E-Zine of High Fantasy and Science Fiction.

All Content copyright © 2004
The Amberlin Group, LLC

Table of Contents

Note From the Editors 3
The Lamp Post Awards 4
Writing Challenge 5
Fantasy Short: *Breath of the Kraken* 13
Featured Artist: Vincent Di Fate 14
SciFi Short: *Contagion* 16
Interview: James Alan Gardner 17
Amberlin Books Publications 20
Fantasy Short: *Out of the Dark* 21
Deep Magic Looks at Books 22

Subscribe to Deep Magic!

A subscription to Deep Magic is absolutely free. Each month, we will notify you when a new issue is released. You will also be notified periodically when Deep Magic has special news or offers. Go to the website and subscribe today.

If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will make a note on the corrections page for that issue. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please let us know, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

July 2004

The summer heat must have dazed many of our readers last month because the turnout voting for the Lamp Post Awards has been a little weak. Rouse yourselves from the lethargy of summer naps and lemonade. Your vote makes a difference. We would like to see all of our regular readers weighing in on the best stories, artwork, and articles from the last year. If you've lost your way, you can find the selections on our website.

Now on to the feast before you. Hollywood has brought a new take on the King Arthur legend this month, and so has Deep Magic. We welcome back Scott Clements with a new spin on the Arthur and Merlin legend, *Out of the Dark*. And if you thought the undead pirates marauding the Caribbean last summer were frightening, watch out for an even worse fate as two pirate ships clash over prey in *Breath of the Kraken*, a story by A. Creg Peters. And for those who think a little rash may be the result of an alien abduction, you won't want to miss Keith Robinson's humorous sci-fi yarn, *Contagion*.

We also have another published author to grace our pages. Deep Magic conducted an exclusive interview with sci-fi author James Allen Gardner. We picked his brain about the craft of writing and his own career.

Our cover art this month is by the esteemed artist Vincent Di Fate. We really took interest in his piece "The Good Stuff" – it's about as science fiction as you can get.

Keep the writing challenge pieces coming as well. Some of our writers get inspired by the writing challenge and produce a piece that doesn't exactly meet the spirit of the challenge. That's actually fine. If you need it, take some extra time and polish it up as a regular submission. The goal of the challenge is inspire you. If it takes you down a new path and uncharted roads, we've been successful. We really enjoy receiving these submissions each month. Keep up the good work.

Now, be sure to swing by the Lamp Post award nominees before you go any further. We wouldn't want you to forget…

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

It's hard to believe it's that time of year again, but sure enough, we're ready to begin voting for the Lamp Post Awards. Each year, we ask you, our readers, to vote for your favorite Fantasy short, Science Fiction short, Article, and Cover Art from a list of nominees, chosen from our panel of editors.

We've featured some great stories, articles, and cover artists this past year (our years, by the way, run from June through the following May). It was a tough decision just coming up with the nominees. Choosing the best will be even more difficult. Of course, that's why we're asking for your help. Below you will see a list of the nominees. If you haven't read them all, feel free to download the appropriate issue and read them (next to each nominee is the corresponding issue). You have all summer. Voting will close on August 15, 2004, with the winners to be announced in the September issue.

If you have any questions, feel free to stop by the forums and let us know. We also welcome you to join or start a discussion about the Lamp Post awards while you're there.

Click Here to Vote!

Science Fiction Short Stories

Swarm by A.J. Thompson (August 2003)
Cohesion Lost by Darrell Newton (March 2004)
Where Memory Has Lease by Mark Reeder (April 2004)
A Taste of Time by Abby Goldsmith (May 2004)
Our Own Personal Gaia by Alexander R. Brown (June 2003)
The Interstellar Public Health Inspector by Nigel Atkinson (May 2004)

Fantasy Short Stories

A Hero by Any Other Name by Wade Albert White (January 2004)
A Winter Stew by M. Thomas (October 2003)
Into Pohjola by Scott Clements (October 2003)
Kenatos by Jeff Wheeler (April 2004)
Limbo the Black-Souled by Steve Poling (January 2004)
Spells End by Mark C. Ford (August 2003)
The Archer and the Dove by Bret Ludwig (May 2004)
The Garden of Lost Dreams by Lynn-Marie Braley (November 2003)
The Lost Colony of Arob Arot by A.M. Stickel (November 2003)
The Well That Never Ended by Usman Tanveer Malik (April 2004)

Covers

August by Jeff Bedrick (August 2003)
Bitter Chivalry by Todd Lockwood (December 2003)
Evening Duty by Rob Katkowski (October 2003)
Exiles by Peter Kudriashov (September 2003)
Warrior's Bond by Matthew Stawicki (February 2004)

Articles

New York Field Trip (1 and 2) by Jeff Wheeler (July 2003/August 2003)
Notes On the Hero by M. Thomas (June 2003)
Peas and Carrots by Brendon Taylor (October 2003)
The Geek In Me by Jeremy Whitted (June 2003)
To Outline, Or Not to Outline? by Kristen Britain (September 2003)
Vocabulary by Cecilia Dart-Thornton (January 2004)

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. ***Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers.*** We invite you to take us up on this month's challenge (below) by submitting your best effort by the **15th** to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net.

July 2004 Writing Challenge

This month's challenge builds a bit on the Tall Tale from last month. With our upcoming Children's issue in August, we thought we'd gather a round of Fairy Tales for our Kenatos world-building project. Fairy Tales are often simlilar to Tall Tales, but they are usually told to children and typically involve some sort of mythical character (fairy, goblin, elf, etc.). They often tell of princes and princesses, usually have a happy ending, and are frequently disguised morality tales.

So for your challenge, the Kenatos Fairy Tale must include a child, a talking animal, a prince/princess, and/or a mythical creature (such as a goblin, giant, or elf). Bonus points if you can include all four! Keep your submission under 1000 words.

Selections from the June 2004 Writing Challenge

Bernabas the Unfortunate
Sun Moon Fire Ice
Vea and Vahoc

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

Now Kenatos has a start to its bestiary and we have seen a glimpse of its ranger class, perhaps we should attend to another fine detail to the fabric of a fantasy world: Legends and tall tales. Not all great heroes live in the age a story is told, and those who have gone on before leave their marks on those who follow. At least one of the Editors of Deep Magic enjoys Robert Jordan's detailed past that arises in his present. Jain Farstrider and the Dragons of the past live again through the lives of Rand, Matt, Perrin, and the other protagonists in the Wheel of Time. The challenge this month is to create a legend about a mythical hero who once strode across the land of Kenatos. Perhaps, like St. Patrick, he drove the snakes from the land. Or maybe, like Paul Bunyan, he cleared the land of trees with the help of a bluish beast of burden. Write your tall tale set in Kenatos in 1000 words or less. We look forward to meeting your fictional-historical-larger-than-life-creations.

Bernabas the Unfortunate, Mirton the Foolish

By Amy R. Butler

He stood out like a frightened light deer in the midst of a pack of fanged milslayers. Pale in hair, eyes and face, it wouldn't have taken a priest to know what his white fist was clenched around.

Only thieves come to my pub.

I poured an ale and swung around from behind the bar, giving him a sympathetic, motherly smile as I put the liquor in front of him and patted his shoulder gently.

"It's on the house, dear," I said.

He stared at the mug, then glanced up at me, trying out a shaky smile. I pushed the chair opposite him back with my heel and settled myself down.

"You seem a little shocked," I said. "Don't worry; it'll pass. They all feel that way at first. What's your name?"

His mouth moved, but only a croak came out. He grimaced, cleared his throat, and tried again. "Mirton."

"Trelly," I introduced myself. "Owner and bar mistress of this pub. Let me tell you, darling, I've seen plenty of scared new thieves. They all come back within a few months, as cocky and confident as thieves years into the trade."

Mirton slid the ale closer to him. "Is it hard?"

I shrugged. "It doesn't have to be. I've heard stories of thefts that should have been impossible, of tradesmen who've been caught and hanged, but most of the time my patrons trade stories about the witlessness of their clientele."

The boy took a gulp of the liquor, his eyes going wide with the bitterness. I fleetingly wondered if he had ever downed more than two mugs at a time.

"There are certain precautions, though," I said, leaning back in my chair and crossing my legs, my face grave. Mirton swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing, and he put his mug down slowly.

"There are?" he asked.

I nodded. "You hang around the pub long enough, and you'll hear all sorts of stories." I uncrossed my legs and made to stand up.

"Can you tell me one?" he asked quickly.

I paused, then settled back in my chair. "All right. I'll tell you one of the legends of Havenrook, Bernabas the Unfortunate. One of the greatest thieves of all time, they say. Once took the tiara off the Empress of Boeotia herself.

"But even the best of thieves get into trouble. Sometimes the greatest risk is not the difficulty of the heist or the rawness of your skill. Sometimes the greatest risk is your own comrades. Bernabas rode to Alkire one day with two other thieves. The three of them had planned and plotted until they conjured up a scheme that would have them carrying treasure enough to buy all of Havenrook."

Some of my other patrons were roaring at each other, on the verge of a full-blown fistfight.

Normally I myself would go to them and soothe it over, but I never leave a customer. Instead my serving girl sprang into the middle of the argument, screamed loudly at the men in Rookish, hauled them to the door and threw them out.

"The night of the heist," I continued, talking over the cheers, "something went horribly wrong. It wasn't Bernabas' fault, but he was the one that the dwarves caught. They dragged him to their so-called 'justice chamber' and began inflicting such torture that would burn your ears if I told you. Bernabas screamed and cursed, and from his lips fell a reference to the two other thieves. The dwarves stopped their torture immediately, demanding information on Bernabas' accomplices. He held out, bargaining for a lifetime in Alkire jail instead of days and days of torture. When the dwarves finally consented, Bernabas opened his mouth to tell them the names of his compatriots..."

"When a knife flew from the shadows, striking him in the heart and rendering him silent forever."

Mirton almost dropped his ale. His mouth was hanging open as he imagined the scene, the mob of blood-splattered dwarves swarming through Alkire, searching for the two fugitives.

"The other two thieves were never found," I said quietly, letting his imagination run. "Their names were never revealed, and no one but The Registry knows what happened to them."

I stood, taking Mirton's now empty mug and placing a hand on his shoulder.

"You'll find plenty of thieves to learn from here in Havenrook," I told Mirton. "In no time you'll be a fine thief yourself. But never trust anyone else. The adage 'The only friends among thieves are fools' is true.

"But I'm sure you'll do fine. Night, son."

I slipped back behind the bar and threw the empty mug into the wash pan. Mirton was just at the door of the pub, stumbling over the threshold. I sighed and gave a pitying smile at his back. That one was going to need a lot of work.

I hooked my thumb under the waistband of my apron and drew out a small blue leather pouch. I opened a cabinet behind the bar and threw it on top of the growing pile. That was the sixth tonight.

Bernabas the Unfortunate, Mirton the Foolish. The number of stories just grew and grew.

Sun Moon Fire Ice
The First of the Eight Tales of Ithnea and Salusad

By Ally Wrenn

And thus the land became dark. Crops waned. Earth grew cold. Sun hid behind Moon. Such was how it began, with the Dark Days and the story of Ithnea and Salusad.

Newcomers arrived out of season. Trees were sparse, having been used for extra shelter, and slowly burned away to keep out the chill. Winter held fast with only the edges of light shining down to warm the once-forested village of Anset. It was there that Ithnea lived, huddled in her small cabin, the whispers about her ever present.

"She has something in there, I tell you," they said to each other inside the warmth of their homes. "Food, carts of it, dried and kept all to herself."

"No, no. It's stockpiled wood she has. Selfish. No better than us she isn't."

"Nary a visitor comes by her house. We've at least a dozen we've taken in outta the cold and kindness of our hearts, mind you."

"Won't survive long like that, she won't. Mark me. Why, if we hadn't taken in that odd looking feller from the East, we'd've had less to fill our bellies. Hunts well, he does."

Still, none of those residing, or those newly come saw much of the mysterious Ithnea. It was the former village droler that was talked into visiting her. His wife, tired of his uselessness at the hunt, shoved him into the frosted, pitted plain of the once-forest.

"You goes over there and sees what she's hiding. Steal it if you have to, but don't you come back here till you says what you sees, or you got something to burn, or it's your coat I'll be cooking with."

So he went, huddled against the chill and scurrying like a furred marmot up to no good. He edged about her cabin and pressed his nose to the window, but it was dark. And, being more coward than fool, and more thirsty for drink than roguish, he snuck to a far off neighbor, whose house could not be seen from his.

Upon his wife's demand of an account, he told her a tale. Of Ithnea the Terrible. A worker of dark arts, casting a spell upon him. How he only just escaped her lair. Yes there was food-flesh of lost travelers. In a cellar no less. Chance had saved him. Barren plains had shown the wind to her door, slamming it and awakening him from his ensorcelled state. He being the village droler, none of course believed him.

But a traveler did come, and happened upon her doorstep for shelter. The villagers kept their lights low and hidden, for it was beyond the time for sleep, and none wanted to show signs of arousal, lest the traveler be drawn to their door. All watched, breathless and elbowing for room, to see if she would emerge. To see if for once what the droler said was true. Ithnea did not answer the traveler's summons.

"Look!" Those closest cried to each other in low whispers. "Do you see? Eyes of stars."

"Perhaps he holds the sun. Perhaps it is he who has stolen the sun away." For many had begun to question the sun's return, and feared the answer.

The traveler, having nowhere else to go, huddled upon Ithnea's doorstep. One kind-hearted woman watching shooed her children from the windows and, against the will of her brothers, opened her door and held out a light.

"Come in from the cold, newcomer. She has never answered her door."

"Perhaps she's dead," her husband muttered behind her, but the woman paid him no mind.

The traveler rose and entered the kind woman's cabin, thanking her. He questioned them on the strangeness of her isolation, and they could not answer him, for they lived in a time when human nature was at its best and only on rare occasions, its worst. Again, the woman's husband muttered rumors of her death.

The traveler answered, "She's not dead. Or at least the scent of death does not hang on her door."

"How's that?" they asked the traveler.

"Fresh, warmed air streams from the edges of her doorway and the nooks and crooks of her logs. Creatures of death do not lurk upon the doorstep, and light noises too heavy for light creatures haunt the inner darkness. There is something else. Scents of old writings waft from between the cracks"

Thus it was the traveler who renewed the village's rumor mongering and turned angry eyes Ithnea's way. Perhaps it was her own fault for staying within and not explaining her isolation, but would they have understood?

The Dark Days lagging, hungry bellies made for disgruntled residents- new and old alike. They chose Ithnea, the least of their collective acquaintances, to purge their unrest. They banded together and approached her house. The door was not much of an obstacle for so great a determined force. Though surprised, she met them, and they roughly dragged her from her house and onto the pitted field. There the women, bundled up in ragged skirts and shawls, held her.

Others entered and cried out triumphantly.

"What is it?" asked the anxious crowd.

"Writings. Dozens of them."

"You musn't touch them. They must be kept," Ithnea cried, shrugging off the women, though the fatigue of famine had crossed her door as well.

"These could keep us warm for a season at the least. Maybe the Dark Days will be gone from us then. Enough for ten-fold each."

"No. They are the teachings of re-growth, of communion in the spirit of nature. They tell of the hunting and finding of foods and the safeness of plants. They cannot be destroyed for kindling."

"What need have we for such things? We know the workings of the fields and the hunting of the beasts. We teach our children the growing ways and understanding of nature. I have already given up my grandmother's crib, my son's summer shoes," one woman said. "They had more value than these."

Ithnea could not plead with the people. They would not listen. They began to take her scripts. She was held back and knocked down, clutching close whatever she could save, but they soon found she was not willing to risk their destruction for her possession of them. As they began to walk away with her scripts a voice cried out.

"Hold! Are you now scavenging dogs? Even wolves do not steal from their own pack."

The villagers turned to behold a scruffy man, tall as a sapling. It was the carriage of his person, the straightness of his shoulders, his gleaming eyes, proud bearing and reddened cheeks

that paused them. Here was a man who surely had not gone hungry, for even the fattest of them did not appear so.

"Return her belongings. Return them at once and I, Salusad of the Sea, will show you a sight of a feast."

Mouths watered, bellies yearned, and the villagers wondered if they could trust him. They stood motionless in indecision. The traveler with Eyes of Stars moved from where he watched and took a place beside the newcomer.

"I will see what you have to offer, for you have the cast of a healthy glow of skin, and do not smell of dead things, but of fruit and meat. Your clothes are snug and patched, and I hear the impatience of a steed."

The newcomer laughed. "Right you are, friend." Smiling first at the traveler, he then frowned at the villagers. The people of the village looked at each other before one, then more, stood before Ithnea and threw down their cache. Soon Ithnea had her scripts and the villagers were told to take what they liked from their homes and gather by the northern path, which led toward Cold Mountain.

"Leave your scripts and come." Salusad offered. "They are of no use where we are going."

Ithnea shook her head. "No. I must stay. There are too many and they are my burden. They will be needed. I must look after them." She gathered the scripts, as much as she could carry and began toting them back into the cabin.

Salusad's proud demeanor softened. Puzzlement and curiosity hung in his gaze on Ithnea as she entered her door. "Food grows ever scarcer. The Dark Days I hear are close to an end, but they will go on for a while yet."

Ithnea turned from her cabin doorway. "Here I will remain, until the Dark Days pass."

A sudden smile lit Salusad's face and the villagers whispered amongst themselves as to whether it harbored trickery or mischief. "Then I will see that those days pass well for you."

So it was that Salusad led the villagers into Cold Mountain and the Dark Days' paradise while Ithnea returned to the tending of her scripts within her cold, small cabin. The people of the village found shelter in the cavern of a great and mighty dragon, whose fire they said burned within the cavern's belly, giving light and heat. And the dragon itself, having died of old age as all dragons must, made for a great and mighty feast, preserved with magic and salt as it was. And there they dwelt within the enchanted orchard hidden away behind the cavern entrance, alongside the others Salusad had gathered, to await the end of the Dark Days.

The end did come and the sun shone again. Salusad, who had gathered others, told them of the coming of the sun. For not only had he searched out those in need of the great dragon's cavern during the last of the Dark Days, but he'd also kept vigil on the determined and bedraggled Ithnea.

The seasons started to slowly grow, and the people of the village, with the dragon meat dwindling and the enchantment with it, emerged from the cavern older, fatter, and less wise. They returned to Anset, smaller in number, for those that had arrived out of season to seek shelter and food had found their own kin in the cavern. When the people of Anset took to their cold and untended houses, they found they'd forgotten much of what they'd been taught. The enchantment of the orchard was wearing away and as a side effect, much of what they'd learned, they found they could not remember.

Thus, Ithnea and Salusad taught them from her scripts what knowledge they needed, and kept teaching them until they could remember. And when they could, Ithnea and Salusad left them. Some say they traveled to the West in search of the Sea, while others claim they went

South to seek out others to teach. One fact remains- the Archive of Ithnea exists, hidden away within the corridors of Kenatos' keep. And within those scripts are rumored great magics, great knowledge, and a map to paradise.

Vea and Vahoc

By A.M. Stickel

Of men, their works and their words, much is said and remembered with reverence. Of women, so little is remarked as to be almost nothing. Yet, without them, none of us would exist, nor would our land itself. In our day, few sing of her whose name was Vea, which means 'butterfly' in the old tongue.

During the Great Wars, valiant heroes of every race came forth and vied with one another for the world. The lesser were slain by the sword and black magic. The greater arose and established fiefdoms. They troubled and enslaved those under them so that their wills were utterly broken. Of all the lowly, only Vea's spirit remained whole.

"Listen to the winds! They promise Freedom," said Vea one day to her mother as they labored in their lord's fields. "Our time is now. Come with me."

Her mother, Larel, answered her, "Your dreaming is a waste of time. Recall how your father was executed for idleness before he could beget a son to provide for me. Instead, I'm cursed with a worthless daughter, whom I should have buried at birth. Winds blow false. They'll only lead you into confusion. You'll become food for wild beasts or a slave of an even crueler master. Keep silence and continue your work. The weeds won't wait."

When Larel finished speaking, she stood from her stooped position to rub her sore back and enjoy the caress of the sun on her face. She took a dipperful of water from the bucket by her side. Then she closed her eyes at the soft kiss of the summer breeze, and opened them to check on Vea's progress along the row. Where a moment before her daughter had stood there was nothing but a shimmer in the air.

"Master will call me to account for the loss of his chattel," cried Larel to the empty air. "Return, Vea!" Her only answer was an echo from the green-clad hills and the lowing of kine in a nearby pasture.

Larel ran to the place where Vea had stood and pressed her hand to the girl's dusty foot prints. Seeing that no prints led away from the spot, she wept bitter tears.

* * *

Vea rode on wings of wind to a high mountain top. Upon its icy rock stood a dark castle obscured by clouds and surrounded by a moat of fire. Lightning blazed. Thunder boomed. Sleet cascaded from the gloomy sky, yet did not quench the fire. Armored monsters with terrible teeth, claws, and loud roars writhed in the flames. Two hideous stone giants guarded the entry beyond the moat.

"I am Woe," screamed one, shaking his axe at Vea. "My twin, Misery, and I cannot allow you to pass, slave."

Vea fluttered to the ground beside the moat. “I will pass,” she declared, lifting her emaciated arms. The clouds opened and a rainbow bridge formed. She put her dusty little foot upon the rainbow, and crossed over it to the castle. Monsters leapt high, but could not reach her. The giants brought down their axes so hard that they embedded their edges in the ice. Vea ran through the gap between them. The rainbow dissolved behind her.

“What do you want of me, starveling? This is no place for you. Go home.”

The castle’s lord, Vahoc, reclined upon a throne of skulls, a misty veil covering his features. His robe was stinking, bloody hides. The crown of gray shadow adorning his head was set with pulsing hearts harvested from his victims. Vahoc’s hands and feet ended in iron-tipped scaled claws strong enough to take and tear whatever he wanted.

“Great Lord, it will do me no good to leave. My master had my father executed for idleness. Mother has probably also been slain for losing me, although I was only a small item of property. I could not convince her to join me. My parents are released from slavery in the only way open to the lowly. I have flown beyond fear to Freedom. Freedom has brought me here to bid you change.”

“Why should I listen to a puny girl? You’ll be the one to change once I throw you in the dungeon.” Lord Vahoc clenched and unclenched his fists.

Vea did not flinch when his long, barbed tail coiled around her, pinning her arms to her sides, and Vahoc warned, “No more tricks.”

“You don’t realize it, but we have something in common, Sire,” said Vea.

“I doubt that we have anything in common,” growled Lord Vahoc.

“Neither of us has Love -- I, because I am low and considered unworthy, and you, because your power is feared,” said Vea.

“I can take whatever I want,” said Lord Vahoc.

“Love is a treasure that can only be given,” said Vea. “Freedom allows the search for Love. Like so many others, my parents gave up because they were hopeless and fearful. Our world is according to your inclinations, Great Lord.”

“What makes you think I’d change it for your whim?”

“I know what hides behind your veil. The winds that lifted the veil whispered what they saw. What they saw is why they brought me here.”

“What is that?” But, even as he spoke, Lord Vahoc’s might melted. In his place a small boy stood. He glared at Vea and clutched a toy box to his chest.

“It’s time to go reorder the world,” said Vea. She took the boy by the hand. They walked to the window that looked out at the world and where the rainbow bridge appeared. The two sat down and slid all the way to the ground.

The boy, Vahoc, opened his box. His toys spilled out and became the races we know today. Whenever you see a butterfly, make the sign of Seitherell. Remember, Vea is still searching for love. Let her find it in your heart.

Breath of the Kraken

By A. Creg Peters

The sleek galleon Retribution plowed through the waves of the Great Blue, sending a mist of cool water over the bow. The spray reached as far back as the poop deck, where a thin, wiry man wrestled with the rudder. All over the ship bare-chested men swung from riggings and scurried in and out of the trap doors of the hold. In the crow's nest above, two watchers shielded their eyes from the clear, bright sun as they scanned the vast blue-green waters.

The Retribution's captain also stood atop the poop deck, savoring the feeling of the ocean air and mist on his face. The wind tugged at his shaggy black hair like a lover; the droplets of salty water, her kisses. Harland Makos was a sailor at heart. The ship was more like a home to him than any house, manor, or apartments could ever be, and Harland felt enlivened at its every rise and fall.

His enjoyment was cut short as he heard footfalls on the deck behind him. With a sigh, he turned to hear the day's report from his first officer Yerin. The older man's drooping moustaches hung down over his bottom lip, and his tendency to mumble made him difficult to understand. Harland strained to hear and caught the end just as Yerin stuck his nose back in a sheaf of papers.

". . . due to meet the Silken Zephyr tomorrow before it reaches Tobego," the old man muttered, shuffling sheets of brown vellum in the leather folder before him. Harland thought the crew would be glad for a shore leave on the tropical island, if it could be managed.

"Escort?" Harland asked, hoping that Yerin had not already mentioned their mission.

"They've paid no route fee, according to the Pact," the old man replied. Try as it might, the Trader's Pact could not control the trade between the Heartland and the Misty Isles, where silk, art, and jingao leaf brought a great deal of money to the merchants who would play by the Pact's rules. "They'll not dock in Tobego either."

As he rounded a rail near the bow, the dirty feet of a sailor poked out from where he was slumped, facedown behind a crate. Kinsoll pursed his lips as he walked over to the crevice between the rail and the crate. A few moments passed before Kinsoll realized that the form was not breathing.

"Odd," Harland noted, although it was likely that they were smuggling and meant to avoid the island's sentries. "And the ship?"

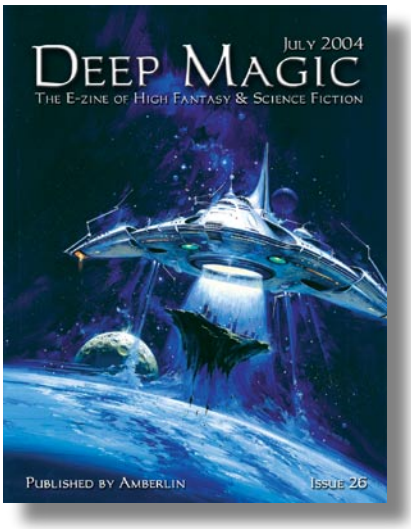
"Built for holding crates, unless Brannard is mistaken." The Retribution's link to the Pact prowled the docks of Baneer and checked the departing ships to see if they had paid their "route fee" to the Traders.

"We should make for Kraken's Breath then," Harland said, nodding to himself. He sighed at the thought of once again navigating the tumultuous waters.

"The Fork will be the best place to wait, I suppose," Yerin agreed. Legend held that it was the trident of the merman king that kept the Kraken at bay, but the three rocks at the

continued on page 26

Featured Artist
Vincent Di Fate



Age: 58
Residence: Wappingers Falls, New York
Marital Status: Yes, for 36 years
Children: Two sons
Hobbies: Science fiction, film, collecting books, art, movies and movie memorabilia
Favorite Book or Author: Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke
Started Painting In: Since childhood-about 1952 or so
Artist Most Inspired By: John Singer Sargent, Dalì, Stanley Meltzoff, Chesley Bonestell, Howard Pyle, Dean Cornwell
Media You Work In: Acrylics for color work; pen and ink on scratchboard for black and white
Educational/Training Background: Attended the New York-Phoenix on scholarship for undergraduate studies (the Phoenix is now part of the Pratt Institute), and I hold a Masters degree in Illustration from Syracuse University
Schools Attended: The Phoenix, Syracuse University
Other Training: Various classes in astronomy, physics, computer and film studies
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Most major English language hardcover, paperback book and magazine publishers-for the past 36 years. I've produced in excess of 3,000 published works. I've also authored four books, won a Hugo Award for Best Professional Artist, and a few dozen other awards.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: My work can be purchased through Fred Taraba at Illustration House, 110 W. 25th Street, NYC, or through my website
Website URL: http://www.VincentDiFate.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I wanted to go to film school after graduation from high school but couldn't afford to go. I had won a scholarship to art school in a tri-state art competition, so I entered art school kicking and screaming in 1963.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: Narrative, illustrative—somewhat

continued on next page

impressionistic.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: From the books I'm asked to illustrate. Most illustrators see the pictures in the mind's eye as they read. Most non-artists don't. Thus, we are asked to supply them. In science fiction and fantasy, especially, which lie outside the normal life experience, providing a visual frame of reference is essential in helping the reader to understand and believe in the story being read.

Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story...)
A: I created this painting independently of any manuscript. I had the idea of a giant spaceship lifting a city off the surface of the earth on a powerful tractor beam and executed the idea as a comprehensive sketch to keep the concept in mind for an eventual painting. When the Science Fiction Book Club called a few days later with an anthology for me to work on, I sent them the sketch and was instructed to proceed to finish.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: The Science fiction stories, the genre artists and movies of the 1950s, when I was growing up. In those days, anything seemed possible.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Since I'm not dead yet and don't intend to die anytime soon, it's still too early to tell what my artistic successes have been. Art buyers apparently don't feel that my work is as wretched as I think it is, so perhaps my success lies in the mere fact that I'm still doing this after more than three decades.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/ Fantasy genre?
A: There's been progressively less science in the SF side of the genre in the last twenty years or so, and more formulaic writing. Much of it is inspired by the film industry, in which science fiction has a somewhat different spin than it once had in the literature (the fact that most SF movies of the 1950s were in one way or another really about the Cold War, while the literature in those days was more like what started appearing in TV's STAR TREK a decade later, is a good example of this difference). The two aspects of the genre have seemingly converged in recent years. Fantasy, by contrast, has taken off and expanded enormously in popularity, becoming more sophisticated, adult and diversified in recent years.

Contagion
By Keith Robinson

Emmet stared at himself in the mirror. His forehead was definitely larger than it had been the previous day. It wasn't all that noticeable at first glance, but the swollen brow cast an unusual shadow that caused his eyes to appear dark and sunken.

The buds of horns projected from each side of his forehead.

A thorough check from head to toe revealed several light-purple blotches on his shoulders, chest, and legs, all a little sensitive to touch. Those on his thighs were raised and bumpy. He straightened his clothes and went to locate the telephone, which he eventually found under an open, upside-down magazine entitled "Alien Contagion: What You Need To Know." He flopped down onto the sofa and put his feet up on the coffee table. He dialed a number and stared at his bare, ugly pink toes, waiting for an answer.

"Hey, Jake," he said. "It's me." He cradled the cordless on his shoulder, reached for the magazine and absently flipped through the pages. "Listen, sorry I . . . you know . . . got angry and everything. You weren't to know. How are you doing now, anyway? . . . Still in quarantine? . . . Mmm. Listen, I've been reading up on this thing. The Health Department sent me a copy of that magazine you mentioned, the one they sent you. Came by special delivery. Pretty interesting stuff, but not very helpful."

Emmet, like the rest of the world, had seen endless holo footage covering the invasion, starting from the moment the aliens had first come through.

He listened, and nodded.

"So anyway, since you gave me this disease, like any pal would," Emmet said, a little more cynically than he'd intended, "maybe you can tell me something. When the skin starts turning purple and the forehead bulges out . . . well, how much longer does it take after that? Is it a slow change, or fast, or what? The mag doesn't go into much detail."

Emmet listened intently, staring down at the magazine's centerfold where a large group of aliens, streaked with the blood of their victims, had been photographed racing down a grassy hill. The figures in the holophoto moved slowly, at half actual speed—a short looping film clip snapped by a brave or foolish photographer just before he was hacked to death.

"So should I call the White Suits now, or what? The magazine doesn't specify."

A moment later, Emmet nodded, said goodbye and hung up. He stared thoughtfully at the centerfold on his lap, studying the aliens. The article explained in detail how the brutal and bloody onslaught had taken place, how the creatures had arrived through the Anomaly and commenced their rampage. Emmet, like the rest of the world, had seen endless holo footage covering the invasion, starting from the moment the aliens had first come through.

* * *

The valley was quiet. The birds had gone into hiding and an ominous silence had fallen

continued on page 37

James Alan Gardner
Interview

Age: 49
Residence: Kitchener, Ontario
Marital Status: Married
Children: None
Hobbies: Shaolin five-animal kung fu, piano, video games, role-playing games
Personal Quote: That line, 'Blessed are the peacemakers,' went right over your head, didn't it?
Favorite Book or Author: Terry Pratchett
First time you tried to get something published: 1974
Authors Most Inspired By: Pratchett, Robert B. Parker, John Collier, Hermann Hesse, Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Charles Dickens
Schools Attended: University of Waterloo
Degrees: B.Math (Applied Math 1976), M.Math (Applied Math 1978)
Published works: See website below.
Website URL: www.thinkage.ca/~jim

Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published. What happened?
A: My first book wasn't published. Neither were several after that (although I can always hope to hustle them at some future date). One of those unpublished books was good enough to get me an agent (Richard Curtis) even though he couldn't actually place the book. But when I sent him EXPENDABLE, he sent it to Jennifer Brehl at Eos and it sold within a week. That was 1996. Jennifer had been a prominent editor in the late 80's but had taken a few years off and was just getting back into the business. She was looking to start a new stable of authors, and I was in the right place at the right time.

Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?
A: It's certainly easier for readers to send me mail now...and easier for me to answer them. (Like many writers, I find buying stamps a daunting task.) As for dealing with publishers, it's certainly easier and cheaper to submit manuscripts by email rather than sending hard copy. But really, I don't interact much with my publishers. I send them a book every year or so. They send me some notes, I do the edits, and that's it. There's not usually a lot of back and forth.

Q: What has been your inspiration for the settings of your novels?
A: Although all my published novels take place 400 years in the future, I like to set them in places I know. Sometimes it's explicit. COMMITMENT HOUR was set just outside Tobermory (on Lake Huron), and TRAPPED was set in Simcoe, Port Dover, and Niagara Falls (all near Lake Erie). In other books, action may take place on alien planets but I still have various Earth locations in the back of my mind. For example, much of EXPENDABLE takes place in settings I'm familiar with near Lake Erie (on the cliffs above Normandale, or in the marshes at the base of Long Point). The book I'm working on right now (tentatively called NECESSARY EVIL) takes place on campus at a fantasized version of the University of Waterloo.

Q: Do you have any favorite characters? (Yours, of course)
A: Festina Ramos from EXPENDABLE, VIGILANT, HUNTED, ASCENDING, and RADIANT.
Oar from EXPENDABLE and ASCENDING.
Tic from VIGILANT.
Tut from RADIANT.

Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?
A: All the books I've read, of course...particularly three that I bought in the summer I was twelve: DANGEROUS VISIONS (the original) edited by Harlan Ellison, SF 12 (a best-of-the-year anthology) edited by Judith Meril, and FANCIES AND GOODNIGHTS (a short story collection) by John Collier. DANGEROUS VISIONS and SF 12 showed me that science fiction was about a lot more than just spaceships and ray-guns. They also revealed a lot about the writers and how they thought about writing. FANCIES AND GOODNIGHTS demonstrated that SF and Fantasy could be funny. Wahoo!

I've also attended a number of writing workshops including one at the Banff Centre and Clarion West (1989).

Perhaps my greatest influence has been in writing for theatre and doing improv acting. Improv is great preparation for inventing stories and characters. The theatre writing I did began with a group called FASS at the University of Waterloo. FASS is an annual musical-comedy revue and I was on the writing team for several years. We went over the scripts word by word in team editing sessions that really gave me a lot of practice in objective critiquing. Later, I worked in a similar fashion with several other theatre groups, including several seasons of radio drama.

Q: What have you been reading lately?
A: The Jane Austen Book Club, by Karen Joy Fowler
Dark Age Ahead, by Jane Jacobs
The Fourth Hand, by John Irving

Q: How much of your time do devote to writing?
A: About two and a half hours a day on weekdays, about four hours a day on weekends.

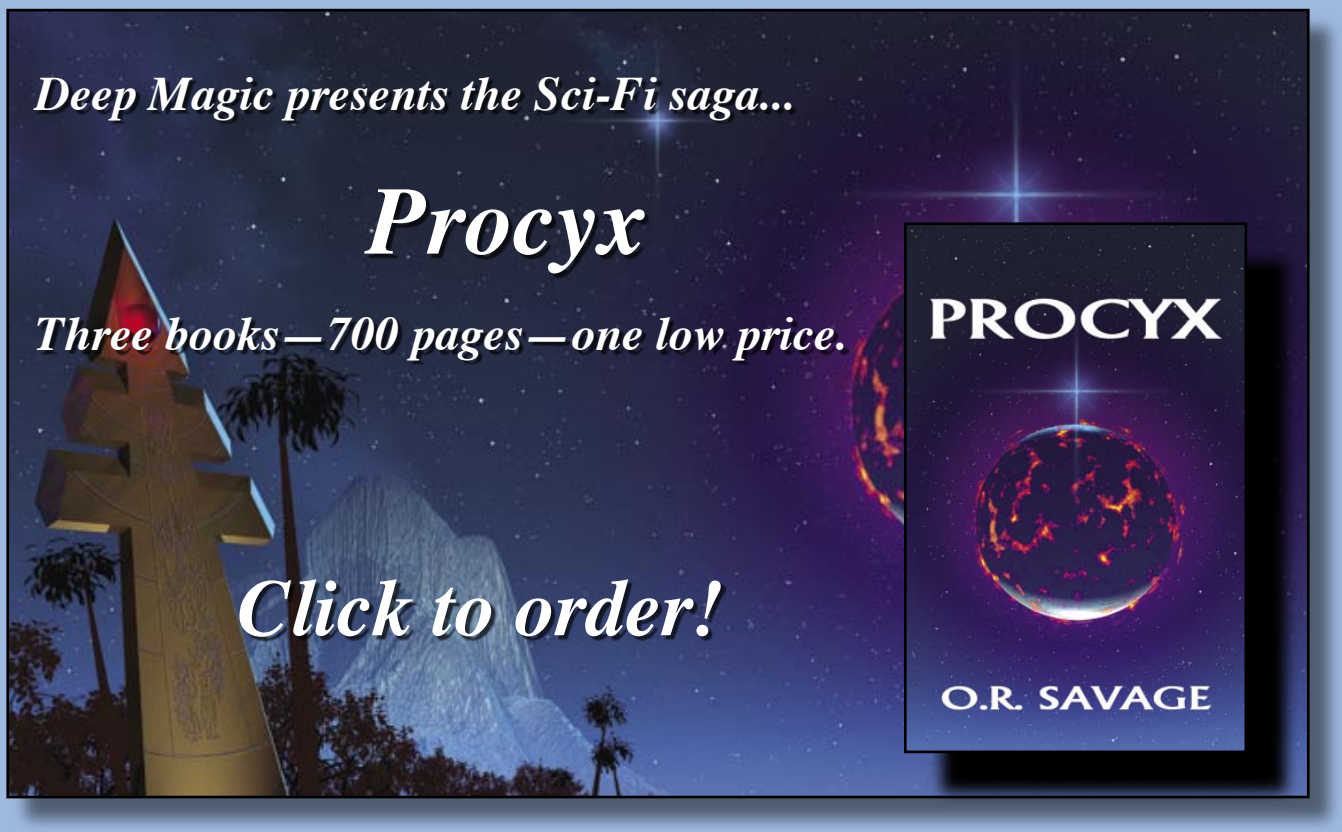
Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
A: Time. I get up, wander around the house, feed the rabbit, make coffee, or whatever. I try to avoid doing anything that's going to suck me in for long periods of time (e.g. surfing the web or playing computer games), but getting some mental distance from the writing is good. I also like to read short magazine articles (e.g. from New Scientist) just to step away for a few minutes. By the time I go back, I'm usually ready to get back to work.

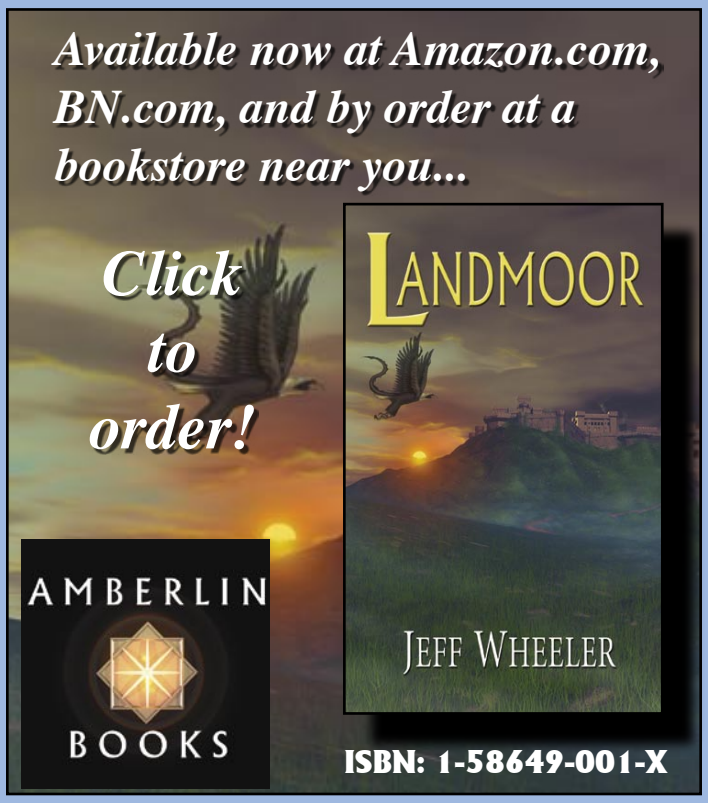
By the way, there are times when your brain stops because you're going down the wrong track. You have to learn to recognize such situations. The solution then is to go back to the point where you went off in the wrong direction and start again. Computers make this process less painful; when I toss out some chunk of writing, I save it to an "outtakes" file so that it's not completely gone. Most outtakes are useless, but once in a while you can lift a sentence or two from discarded material. That's always nice.

Q: What trends do you see in fantasy or science fiction writing?
A: In fantasy, everyone is talking about "The New Weird" and I think we're going to see a lot more of that as the talk turns into books. (Right now, the New Weird is mostly coming from the UK, but we're going to see North American versions very soon.) I suspect the New Weird is going to become a distinctive and significant subsection of fantasy like Urban Fantasy and High Fantasy, though so far, the only real breakout books have been by China Mieville.

On the other hand, I worry about science fiction. Lots of people are writing good same-old same-old, but I haven't seen anything truly electrifying in recent years. The genre seems stuck in a rut, eating its own tail (to mix metaphors). If something doesn't stir up excitement soon, SF is going to be in trouble.

Looking for a way to support Deep Magic? Tell your friends about our books! All of them can be purchased at Amazon.com and other online retailers.





Deeper Magic - A collection of short stories from the first year of Deep Magic.
DEEPER MAGIC
THE FIRST COLLECTION
Click to order!

Out of the Dark

By Scott Clements

Ymerawdwr = *um-er-AWD-oor*
Caladfwlch = KA-lad-voolk

Ynys Enlli, Northern Coast of Wales. 481 C.E.

Beneath the flickering tapestry of yellow-orange light woven by a dozen torches, Arthur stared across the small stone chamber at the old man who had been his most trusted friend since birth. And wondered how he could have been so blind.

"You have not answered my question, Arthur," the old man said with a smile.

Had it been the same smile all those years? Was he just now, for the first time, seeing it for what it truly was? A monster's grin. The broken pieces of the *Ymerawdwr's* heart settled in his breast like shards of glass.

"Come now Arthur, I know this must all come as quite a shock, but it really was a simple question: have you any idea of what becomes of a man who has been sired by a demon upon a virgin of surpassing purity and goodness?"

With a feeling of sickness that touched his soul, Arthur understood that he did know. The realization made him want to weep.

"That man grows, Arthur. He grows and plots and in the end he rules the world." For a moment, the old man examined his wooden staff. Then he turned to Arthur: "My dear boy, that man becomes me."

Arthur stared at the old man in disbelief. "You are mad," he whispered.

The old man closed his eyes and thought a moment. "No," he said finally, "though I am no stranger to madness. For a time, madness and I were very close. But that was long ago, and when we parted, I understood at last the destiny that was mine alone."

The old man. The Treasures. It was almost too much. Arthur thrust the thought aside, tightened his grip, and felt the weight of Caladfwlch in his right hand. He had never noticed its weight before.

Arthur stepped back. "Destiny?"

"Indeed. It is the reason you are here, the reason I made you what you are. It is the reason why I must destroy you."

Arthur's heart raced as he understood at last what was going to happen, what he had been brought to this island to do. To try to do. He narrowed his gaze, glanced beside him. The Thirteen Treasures of Britain glimmered in the corner of the chamber. So much power. Enough to change the world.

Or end it.

The old man. The Treasures. It was almost too much. Arthur thrust the thought aside, tightened his grip, and felt the weight of *Caladfwlch* in his right hand. He had never noticed its weight before.

Then the old man stepped forward. Slowly, he held out his staff. When he spoke, his voice

continued on page 43

Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Classic Fantasy

Silverlock
By John Myers Myers

A. Clarence Shandon is a business major from the University of Wisconsin. He can't help that, though: it's the fate the cards dealt him. As a matter of fact, the fates have been fairly harsh on him, or so Shandon believes when he finds himself on the good ship *Naglfar*, nine days out of Baltimore. One evening he is awakened by the noise of the crew abandoning the ship during the storm. But he doesn't really care:

> "I recall thinking that I was stroking toward either the end of all life or the beginning of a new one. Neither possibility stirred me. Every man knows he will die; and nobody believes it. On that paradox stand not only a host of religions but the entity of sane being. I wasn't able to credit my own non-existence any better than the next man; what I had lost was a healthy abhorrence of the state. It had not dropped from me because of any particular shock or misfortune. It had moulted from me year by year, for all of my thirty-five, to leave me in naked apathy."

But the fates have a better game to play with Shandon. Just when he thinks all is lost, a part of the mast of the drowning ship shows up, to which he clings for life. While floating, he comes across another castaway, the enigmatic Boyan Taliesin Golias. Together, they make their way toward an archipelago which Golias identifies as the Commonwealth. Once they have reached dry land, their adventures continue as they encounter one literary figure after another, for the Commonwealth seems to be a land where characters from folk tales, books, and stories all live, happily co-mingling with one another, yet never aware of the incongruities.

As Golias and Shandon (who is now known as Silverlock, due to a white streak in his hair) make their way from one end of the Commonwealth to the other, Shandon, who is blissfully unaware of the literary nature of the wonderland he's fallen into, slowly comes to an understanding that the point of life is not an M.B.A, but rather the point of life is to be lived; life is a rich draught to be drunk deeply. To come to this conclusion, Silverlock passes through many adventures in the Commonwealth, from being a part of a Viking raid on the Irish, to falling in with Robin Hood's men, to reveling with Beowulf in Heorot after the slaying of Grendel.

Silverlock is very picaresque in its structure, being a series of adventures connected more by Silverlock's growing awareness of how to live life than by any particular plot. Were it not for this character growth, the various adventures could be scrambled up and re-arranged without any damage to an over-riding plot. But it's this story of self-discovery and awareness that ultimately ties the book together. Indeed, by lacking a traditional 'plot', *Silverlock* brings sharper focus to Shandon's quest of discovery by mimicking the randomness of life itself from one perspective but showing the purposefulness of life when viewed from the other end.

Silverlock was originally written in 1949 and the language that Silverlock uses throughout the book is riddled with the slang of the early post-war era. At first it is brash and rude, looking at all of life ironically and impersonally. But after a while, even Silverlock's diction

continued on next page

changes as he grows in self-awareness. Throughout, however, Silverlock's first-person narrative voice is fun and humorous. I think that even when the book was brand-new on the shelf, Silverlock's word choices would have brought a smile to the reader. At a distance of more than half a century, it is more so.

Nearly all editions of *Silverlock* since the first Ace edition in the late '60s have contained laudatory essays by Poul Anderson, Larry Niven, and Jerry Pournelle. While such essays tend to be more sales gimmicks than anything else, one must question why three of the genre's greats would give such high praise to a novel. Fortunately, *Silverlock* holds up to the praise showered upon it.

Possible objectionable material: Silverlock's actions and words contain sexual innuendo, especially early on when he is quite the cad.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Science Fiction
Shivering World
By Kathy Tyers

Sometime in the future, mankind heads to the stars. Not only that, but Man has for the most part abandoned Earth, with only a small fraction of humans living there. The majority of the population, however, is not living on other planets, but living in orbiting habitats and stations throughout known space. Finding or creating planets that can sustain humans has been a hard road, with massive terraforming projects not always meeting with success.

The latest colonized planet is Goddard, where the terraforming is progressing slowly. The inhabitants of Goddard are a group of religious/scientific radicals who have fled to Goddard to separate themselves from the government that would declare their beliefs wrong and illegal.

To this terraforming project comes Dr. Graysha Brady-Phillips who is dying from a rare genetic disease that prevents her from physically exerting herself and that will eventually lead to an early death. Graysha's motives for coming to Goddard are mixed. On the one hand, she is on the run from a bad marriage, and the incredibly high pay will help her pay off the debt she incurred with her divorce. On the other hand, she may be able to find a cure in the illegal research that is rumored to take place on Goddard.

But all is not well in the terraforming community. Among the Goddardites themselves are those who want to radically separate themselves with military power from the interstellar government, while there are others who want to take a more peaceful path to separation. Then, among the terraformers who are on Goddard, there appears to be a saboteur who is intent on stopping the Goddard project from succeeding. Thrown into all this mix is the fact that Graysha's own mother heads up the governmental commission that could destroy the Goddardites if the rumors of their illicit research prove to be true.

Into this mix, Graysha finds herself thrown around, bounced back and forth from one competing faction to another. Ultimately, the future of Goddard, and of Graysha herself, may lie in the choices she makes.

Shivering World is well-written 'soft' science fiction. While the science is there in the descriptions of terraforming and is important to the forward movement of the plot, this is not a story about science, but rather of how human nature responds to the advancement of science. Specifically, it is a look at how religion and science intermix and how they can and cannot live comfortably together.

The plot and characters are well done, which is not a surprise from a NY Times bestselling author. Overall, an enjoyable book.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

continued on next page

Book Review: Science Fiction

Throne Price

By Lynda Williams and Alison Sinclair

Descended from Earth's space pioneers, two human civilizations, that of Gelion and that of Rire, are poised on the brink of interplanetary war. Gelion's Sevolites dominate this tale. Amel and Erien, two Sevolite lords sympathetic to the Reetions, remain Rire's main hope throughout the story, which focuses on their efforts to hold back the warlike elements of their feudal society. The Reetion Republic is governed by computer and the principle of open access to information for every citizen; equal rights are guaranteed. Gelion, on the other hand, is a caste system stratified according to genetics, with commoners living a dismal existence at the bottom, and royalty, divided into its own levels of racial purity, at the top. Modified genes make this upper class superior in space, due to their descent from ageless space ship pilots with the bioenhanced ability to withstand the environment. Royalty is tested by duels in which swordsmanship determines the balance of power and, therefore, government policy.

The machinations and lifestyle of the Sevolites, rather than those of the Reetions, are extensively explored in *Throne Price*. Under the leader and co-leader, the Ava and the Avim, both "immortals," the royal houses jostle for power. The major gene lines, Demish and Vrellish, have long been crossed and blended to produce the rare pureblood, a few royal bloods, and many other lords—high, mid, and minor. The lords are divided into hearths or houses, designated by the colors white, green, black, lilac, silver, and red, with brown and gold held in trust. The writers have woven an intricate tapestry of intrigue based on these colorful characters. In order to understand it, frequent reference to the list of characters and glossary of terms is necessary.

While Rire's values call to mind those of the present-day Western world, its citizens are described as swarthy. Sevolites are dominated by pale-skinned, physically impressive individuals, whose proclivities can only be described as decadent by modern standards. A few glimpses of the planetary landscape and outer space entice, but most action takes place in the buried city of UnderGelion. The layout is lavishly rendered, as are the habits of its primary players. The highly personal perspective of the authors, rather than detracting from the literary quality, makes it a mesmerizing read. This only serves to whet the appetite for the other nine works in the series. No wonder *Throne Price* is a finalist for Foreword Magazine's Book of the Year Award in Fiction/ Science Fiction, as well as for the 2004 Benjamin Franklin Award from Publisher's Marketing Association.

Despite reservations about morally objectionable sexual practices present in its content, I found the writing in *Throne Price* some of the most moving and compelling I've encountered. The dueling scenes, in particular, are gems. And that's from someone who prefers short stories to novels, and is less than thrilled by the finer points of swordsmanship.

Possible objectionable material: explicit detail of objectionable sexual practices.

(Reviewed by Anne Stickel)

Book Review: Fantasy

Tales of the Dervishes

By Idries Shah

This contemporary work of Idries Shah, first published in 1967, was gathered from written and oral traditions on three continents. There are eighty-two short stories, some making their point in as little as two paragraphs. Beyond being excellent entertainment, they provide food for thought for readers and writers of fantasy. Children and adults alike will benefit from their insight into human nature. Dervish tradition involves exploring familiar themes to find many layers of meaning. Short notes on their origins are appended at the end of each tale. The brief chronological appendix

continued on next page

that closes the book is a special treat for historians interested in following up on story authors whose lives span the seventh through twentieth centuries.

Some of the stories include "The Food of Paradise," "The Wayward Princess," "The Idiot in the Great City," "The Man Who Walked on Water," "Wisdom for Sale," and "Wayfarer, Strangeness and Savetime." Presented as parables or allegory, these stories remain in the true realm of fairy tales. Simple words and straightforward dialog are the rule. A few non-English terms are explained in parentheses. While place names are based on exotic locations in the Arabic world and India, the messages, some echoing Aesop or H.C. Anderson, are universal.

In the stories, we meet genies and talking animals, mendicants and alchemists, merchants and tradespersons, lovely princesses and proud rulers, poets and prophets, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, elders and infants. No vampires or werewolves interrupt the traveler, but thieves and fortune hunters abound, and an occasional ogre appears. The moods of the various pieces range from playful to sinister, mocking to reverent. Downtrodden characters are uplifted and foolish ones become heroes, but Western logic and rationality do not always prevail. Everywhere, magic happens, as needed in dire circumstances, or, quite unexpectedly, in the midst of the most ordinary dealings. Magic, the double-edged sword, saves the wise and confounds the perverse. "Once upon a time" is a wonderful way to visit the far country of ideas, and the dimensions that surpass the ones we know.

Idries Shah, who died in 1996, comes from a gifted family line, traceable to 122 B.C., and holds a Certificate of Merit for Distinguished Service to Human Thought. In my opinion he has succeeded in presenting yet another "safe place for minds to wander" in his *Tales of the Dervishes*. I recommend his book for readers interested in that fantastic road that we all take between the Beginning and the End.

Possible objectionable material: None.

(Reviewed by Anne Stickel)

continued from page 13

northeastern edge of the Breath would offer cover for the Retribution.

"Very well," Harland said, the white, carved bone fragments sewn into the shoulders clicking as he shrugged into his coat. He held the intricate, worked hilt of his dirk as he dismounted the poop deck. His high, shined black boots produced loud knocks on the deck as he walked toward the mainsail. Shouts of "Captain on deck!" rose as he passed, and the sailors began to gather around him in the center of the ship. Only the navigator at the helm and the lookouts atop the great mast stayed in their positions; the rest looked on their captain with anticipation.

"Men," he said, "The Silken Zephyr belongs to us!" The crew of the Retribution roared.

* * *

Kinsoll Drussio's head roared with the previous night's liquor as he emerged from his cabin. His skull throbbed in time with his heels as he walked the decks of the Fassaen Dagger. He was not sure who had proposed the game of throwing daggers at—he was not sure what—with the one who missed swilling from a jug of Tobego rum. If the memory came back to him he swore to eviscerate whoever it had been, but the thought quickly vanished from his mind as he continued his tour of the ship.

The crew of the Dagger was an unruly lot of cutthroats and thieves, gathered from a hundred ports from the Heartland to the Misty Isles. Kinsoll's refined looks had initially alienated him from the crew; however, his boorish manner, in addition to plentiful bounty, before long won him their loyalty. He commanded through off-color comments or jokes at a crewman's expense. These began to fly as he sauntered around the bodies that laid about the deck, some with jugs and bottles still clutched in their hands. With no small amount of groaning and just as many rude responses later, bleary-eyed sailors began to turn the anchor winch and hoist the sails' lines. The wind quickly started to pull the Dagger out of the cove in which it had been anchored and through the clear blue placidity of Merman's Lake.

Once the anchor had been raised, Kinsoll felt better. The sea air seemed especially salty and the tang of it cleared his head. The Dagger cut through the waves like its namesake, its sharply pointed hull casting a fine spray over the bow. At the prow a likeness of a handsome, lithe man extended an arm out. The hand held a stiletto with a point as sharp as the ship itself. Kinsoll liked to stand and bask in the spray as it leapt up over the railing. He found that spray more refreshing than sleep, and it always soothed his mood to look on the carved figure. He fancied that he looked like that carving, or at the very least, that he was of a look that someday might be the carving on another ship. Of course, he thought, it would have to be a much larger one.

As he rounded a rail near the bow, the dirty feet of a sailor poked out from where he was slumped, facedown behind a crate. Kinsoll pursed his lips as he walked over to the crevice between the rail and the crate. A few moments passed before Kinsoll realized that the form was not breathing.

"Who is this?" he shouted, prompting a small group of sailors to gather around the corpse.

"That's Trilford. We took him on in Baneer. Handy, but not the most personable fellow," came the reply, although Kinsoll paid no attention to whoever said it.

"How did this come about?" he wondered aloud, as two of the deckhands hoisted the body upright. Its arm fell away, revealing stab wounds that riddled its torso with some fewer around

the limbs. One dagger still remained lodged in its ribcage. Studying the blade, he raised one boot to the rail and slid out an identical knife. He raised the other boot, fumbled for a moment, and clapped his hand to his head.

"So that's what we were pitching at last night." Smiling, he wiped the blade clean on the dead man's shirt. The deck of the Fassaen Dagger filled with raucous laughter.

* * *

Harland pressed the Retribution on as the crew grew tenser. They hovered on the edge of Kraken's Breath, with only the wild currents to tell them that they had finally entered. Mid-day was a difficult time to enter, as the sun was straight overhead and direction was easily lost once the Breath took hold. They would need time to bring the Retribution about and take her into position behind the Fork. Although the Silken Zephyr likely could not match his own ship for speed, he wanted to take no chances. They would need to be ready to raise the sails quickly in order to catch the ship while it was still in free waters.

The ship rocked gently on the waters as Harland steeled himself at the helm. The sailors stood at ready position grasping lines, with more below deck manning the sweeps. The splash of the waves, the cries of the seabirds, and the creaking of wood and rope were the only sounds that echoed across the ship. It was not until the birds fell silent that Harland set his feet and took the wheel in an iron grip. Yerin took a breath to shout commands, but Harland knew that the Kraken waited for no man.

Without warning the ship lurched nearly sideways. Yerin bellowed, and the crew on deck lowered the sails to three-quarters mast while Harland felt the port sweeps dig back into the water. The ship began to turn, and at Yerin's command the sails were raised again. It moved straight through the current, and then bolted forward only to be slammed to a halt in between what seemed to be two battling drafts. Harland turned the wheel hard to move from in between them, but another rose up under the ship and tossed it forward, high enough for it to buoy in the water. Water rose up over the sides, and Harland could hear the curses from below as it gushed into the portholes.

Harland had sailed the Breath more times than he could count, but still he wrestled with the helm like a Baneerian gladiator. Unlike the rest of the Great Blue, which was tame by comparison and infinitely more predictable, the Breath held a different experience every time. Harland set himself; even if it was his fastest trip through the Breath, it might well be after sundown until they finally anchored behind the protection of the Merman's Fork.

* * *

Kinsoll sat on the rail behind the helm, his legs dangling carelessly to match his mood. They were striking north and east, which suited him just fine. The Dagger had spent some weeks hopping from island to island among the tiny archipelagos east of Tran-nuis, evading the city's fleet and preying on small noble barges. But as much as he enjoyed easy catches, even more he savored bringing down the larger and more formidable merchant vessels. He imagined himself to be like the savage Grassland lions he had heard about, sleek brown creatures that would hunt the toughhide buffalo three times their own size. He wondered if the buffalo were as hapless as some of the merchant vessels seemed to him. He resolved to go and see those lions

one day, provided it would not take him off of the water for too long.

"Ship to starboard," came a cry from the crow's nest, and Kinsoll bounded to his feet. Dodging the helmsman, he sprang off of the rail at the head of the poop deck. The drop was near four paces, but Kinsoll latched onto the rigging and caught a loose line. He swung the breadth of the ship to land on the main deck at the starboard rail. A squeal of pain came from beneath him, but he spared only a, "Mind yourself" for the unfortunate. Fishing in his pockets, he drew out a short tube, and opened the caps at each end. Putting it to his eye, he turned the tiny dials to move fine metal bars to rest at the top of the main mast, the main deck, and the ocean surface. He read numbers off of the side, and quickly counted in his head. All the eyes of the gathering crew were on him as he closed the tube caps with two soft clicks.

"She looks to be a big one. Two miles out, if I've guessed her size right. A great floating crate, she is no doubt fast as one too," he quipped, licking his lips as he fancied the lions did when they spotted a lone buffalo. The crew responded with a mixture of anxious chuckles and murmurs. Turning to take them all in, he flashed a devious grin. "We hunt."

* * *

The sun was beginning to make its final descent into the southeastern sea when the tines of the Merman's Fork poked up from the sea into Harland's view. His arms ached, and his hands were blistered from an entire afternoon of pulling the rudder against the Breath. It was beginning to submit, as it merely shoved them from side to side when they entered the final stretch of the treacherous waters. Harland could feel the shuddering of the helm weaken while the Fork loomed above them.

But when they passed through the left and center tines, it all just stopped. The water loosed its grip on the keel, and the helm went slack. Harland's shoulders slumped; a number of the crew dropped to the deck where they stood. One did climb up to take the wheel from him, asking only the tine behind which they should anchor. Harland walked down the steps, and stopping to grasp a line, dropped through the large cargo door into the hold. A few moments later he emerged from the hold and, using the line, lifted a cask out, which he placed on top of a number of barrels. Crew members shuffled over to him as he found a mallet and tap, and pounded it into the cask. He placed his tankard under the tap, drinking deep from it when full. "Drink up, lads. There's nothing for us to do now but wait."

* * *

The Fassaen Dagger was trained on her prey as Kinsoll ordered the crew around the main deck. The boxy form of the ship grew steadily larger, but he had underestimated her speed. Nonetheless Kinsoll was near to bursting with anticipation, and his hand often strayed to the hilt of his cutlass to rattle it inside the scabbard.

Both ships were at full sails, and Kinsoll knew it was only a matter of time before they were within range of their bounty. When they got close enough, the catapult on the forecastle would reach out for the merchant ship's sails. As she slowed, the Dagger would come about and present great ballistas to launch barbed spears into her hull, if it was soft enough, or grapples over the rails if not. Either way, the ships would close, and Kinsoll would lead the charge across the water to subdue her crew.

The sailors around him scattered this way and that. All wore cutlasses, axes, or dirks on their belts. Along the rails crossbows were lined up with bristling quivers of bolts to thin out the numbers of resistors before they boarded their prey. Kinsoll paced the helm, barking instructions, but really his mind was focused on reaching the ship. Nothing quickened him so much as swinging from a line across the waves, saber in hand, to land among his enemies and cut their valuables from them. He continued to pace, his muscles flexing as the form of the other ship continued to grow in his sight.

Some time passed, and Kinsoll had a sudden thought that his prey was not getting closer. He looked up again, and saw that the sails were full, but still they were not gaining. Moreover, it did not seem to him that the other ship had gained speed, but rather that the Dagger had slowed. He pounded on the helm's rail and bellowed at the crew, but to no avail. He looked around for someone to blame, but the helmsman merely pointed up to the sky and said two words: "No birds."

Kinsoll sneered as the ship was jarred to a near-halt, sending sailors sprawling forward across the main desk. Several fell from riggings, and all manner of objects were scattered about the deck. Through twisted lips Kinsoll muttered under his breath, "Kraken."

The stern of the ship ahead had begun to sink in the water, raising the bow up higher and sloping the whole vessel backward. Kinsoll could see the lashings holding the crates on deck begin to give as deckhands scattered to hold the cargo in place. The helmsman began to turn the rudder, but succeeded only in waggling the ship's bow about in the air. Kinsoll's ship remained balanced, but the surface of the water began to rise up the side of the hull. The helmsman turned the rudder, but the ship responded sluggishly, as if it were moving through tar instead of the ocean water.

Then the drag on his ship released without warning, sending the Dagger bobbing back up to the surface. Some of the crew were able to keep their feet, but others were tossed about as much as when the ship slowed. Kinsoll could see figures on their target stumbling. He would have liked to come upon them during that time, but he had been through the Breath enough to know what came next. Though he did not truly believe that there was a great creature, all maw and tentacles, slumbering under the water, he cursed its name anyway.

The water around the Dagger began to roil. Off in several directions, it erupted in frothy bubbles that spread across the surface. Kinsoll almost believed that the sea took on a darker tinge when these breaths of the great Kraken made their way up from the bottom. As it was, the currents swirled and kicked up against the hull of the ship, and Kinsoll could feel them begin to tug it in different directions. He looked at the other ship to see it being tossed back and forth against bursting bubbles and newly formed eddies.

Kinsoll pushed the helmsman out of the way and gripped the wheel himself. It strained against him like an animal on a leash, pushing when he pulled and trying to jerk itself free of his grip. Once or twice it succeeded, sending the rudder in the opposite direction and the ship into a sharp turn. By the time he got the helm under control they had been turned almost completely about, while the other ship had been able to maintain a straighter course.

"Sweeps starboard!" he yelled, and wrenched the wheel to the left to execute a tight turn. The Dagger began to circle back to follow its prey. The current pushed against it, however, and the maneuver was not as quick as Kinsoll had intended. All the while the other ship, while sliding from side to side and sometimes rotating a bit, managed to make a break for the northeast and the Merman's Fork. Kinsoll growled as he held the wheel, snapping it back into position whenever the Breath pulled it. He was determined to catch that ship now, and when he

did, he almost felt sorry for anyone aboard her.

* * *

Harland looked out over the water as the sun began to sink into the sea. It cast a ruddy orange tint onto the waves as they began to pick up. He hoped that, if the Silken Zephyr was going to pass them, it would do so soon. Although he had seen many successful boardings at night, some of them even by choice, he preferred the light. Fewer unexpected surprises managed to assert themselves by the light of day.

Nonetheless if the Zephyr did come through in the dark, he would have no choice but to pursue. The dark hours of the night would be enough for them to press through and make Tobego's waters, out of the Retribution's reach. Harland sighed and was making plans for just such an eventuality, when one of the longboats approached from its post, just out of the choppy water of the Kraken's Breath. Rope ladders were lowered, and several skinny sailors scrambled up them with the nimbleness of dock rats. They made directly for Harland, who halted the formalities before they began and motioned the men for their news.

"A ship, captain, coming through the Breath. It's got a hold of her, but she's fighting it but good."

"What does she look like?" Harland asked.

"Great boxy thing, from the looks of it. Can't tell no more than that from here."

"Sounds like our girl," Yerin muttered.

Harland nodded in agreement. He pointed to the catapult at the bow and the scorpions that lined the rails. "Make ready. We take them as soon as they leave the Breath."

* * *

Kinsoll was nearly frothing at the mouth by the time he brought the Fassaen Dagger back to its course. Though the Breath was pummeling the ship from all sides, he refused to submit. The other ship had made a better start through the tumultuous waters but it was of no match in speed now that the Dagger had righted itself.

The sun had begun to touch the horizon on their starboard side just as the first tine of the Merman's Fork jumped up ahead of them, due northeast. Kinsoll smiled; once they were clear of the Breath, he would open with the catapults and attempt to ruin their sails. Then all that would be required would be to board and subdue her. The Dagger could fill her hold with whatever looked expensive or interesting and maroon the ship with the rest. Not that he found the killing distasteful; on the contrary, he always hoped to see some of the crew take up crossbows or swords as they prepared to board. But he liked to see that some might live and tell his tale, so he could savor the looks on the faces of merchants and other sailors when he declared himself.

The rudder began to slow its bucking, and ahead Kinsoll saw the other two tines of the Fork poke up into view. The distance continued to close between the ships, and Kinsoll felt sure that nothing could help the other into the safety of Tobego's waters. The Fork continued to rise out of the water before him; Kinsoll could see the other ship begin to stabilize as it neared the end of the Breath.

"Make ready forward!" Kinsoll shrieked. Men scattered to the bow and trained the catapult with the Fork looming over them. The Dagger seemed to sigh with relief as the

Kraken's hold on them diminished. "Away!"

The sound of creaking wood heralded the release of a large leaden ball. It hurtled toward the other ship, falling short and to the side, but the men on the forecastle were already cranking on the winch and lifting another projectile. The creak came again, and the metal blob bounced off the ship's stern just below the rail. Heads snapped around on the ship's deck, and Kinsoll grinned. The Fork was high above them, and the other ship was nearing its great center tine. "Again!"

Just then, the boom of metal on wood filled his ears, and the Dagger reverberated. Kinsoll swung his head to starboard, and saw from behind the furthest tine another ship emerge, forecastle catapult already recoiling for another shot. The ship was moving opposite them, back into the Breath, but they could manage to come about and pursue the Dagger even as it pursued the merchant ship. At this range, the scorpions would be useless. "Flames starboard!" Kinsoll screamed.

Men ran to the crossbows against the ships rails and began dipping bolts in jars of pitch. Moments later, a volley of fire streaked from the Dagger toward the enemy vessel, but fell well short. The other ship's catapult flicked, and a metal shot crashed through the main deck into the Dagger's hold. A cry from below told Kinsoll there was a sailor in the way, and he hoped that the man cushioned the impact enough to save the hull.

He knew the other ship would be on them from behind in moments. Quickly, he resolved to close on the merchant ship as fast as he could, hoping the enemy captain would not fire on them for fear of sinking his prize. "Forward! Fire! Fire, damn you!" he shouted, and the crew responded with another round. It struck somewhere on the deck, though Kinsoll saw it skitter through the port rail and into the water. Another shot went out, but a wave slammed into the stern of the ship, and the shot fell short. It struck just shy of the ship's stern. After a moment, Kinsoll saw shards of wood begin to rise in the water. The merchant ship started to turn, slowly at first but then more quickly, and veered straight towards the Merman's Fork.

* * *

Gharos Bucahnn strained with all his might against the helm, but to no avail. The captain of the Silken Zephyr had thought the last shot from the pirates struck the rudder, and now the ship was turning toward the towering rocks off their starboard side. He continued to jerk the wheel back and forth, trying to free whatever was pinning the ship into its turn. Thankfully, it seemed that even if he failed, the ship would not strike the huge rock formation. He had seen the other ship emerge from the Fork as they approached and prayed that they would delay each other long enough for the Zephyr to make a break for the waters of Tobego.

Turning back to his port side, he saw a great wave rise and dart for them. He thought, in the moment before the wave struck them, that the water was a dark, ominous color. He could almost make out a pair of angry eyes as it washed up and over the Zephyr. The ship was thrown to starboard, and the Fork's tine slammed into the ship broadside. Crates burst through their lashings and shattered across the deck. The crew jumped to avoid them or were struck and crushed. The sound of broken glass filled the air, and a sharp, pungent odor touched Gharos' nose.

He leapt from the helm to the main deck, and peered down at the substance. It was oily, and the light played off the surface to create hypnotic-colored patterns. Recollection stabbed into Gharos' brain, and he began to back away from the puddles of the liquid pooling on the deck.

A sailor popped his head up from the hold and hoisted himself up onto the main deck. Gharos caught his shirt as he passed and spun him around to face him. "The crates below, how did they fare?" he asked with ragged breath.

"Ruined," the lad replied. "The jars was packed too tightly, and the glass broke. The hold is soaked with grain liquor."

"That's not grain liquor, son. It's devil's draught." Gharos cursed himself for a fool. Of course his employer would want him to avoid the Tobego sentries. He pushed the lad away, but kept him fixed with his gaze. The lad's face went white as sea-foam, and he too began to back away from the tincture as it rolled over the deck. "Get you to the longboats. To the longboats, all of you! Abandon the ship! I say, aban…"

* * *

Harland's heart raced as the Retribution came about behind the pirate vessel. Their catapult rained metal down on the ship, but none had struck the sails or masts to slow it down. Then he saw a great wave lift the merchant ship, throwing it into the Fork. He knew that the pirates would reach the prize before them. He began to give the commands. "Man the ballistas!"

Just then the merchant ship exploded in deep crimson flame, parts of the rails and upper deck flying apart like paper. The fire roared about the hull, tendrils weaving in and out of the portholes like great red serpents. Licks of it seemed to chase the crew through the deck, and bodies engulfed in fire flailed about before dropping or falling overboard. He stared for some moments at it before recognition struck home.

"Drop the sails, sweeps full to stern!" Harland shouted, and the ship shuddered as the men below tried to slow the ship's momentum. He had seen devil's draught, once, and he did not want to come within an arrow's flight of the Zephyr if that was what it had been carrying. Fire from that witch's brew was queer, for lack of a better word. It moved and grew without fuel or wind; it was even said to hunger for flesh to burn.

More eruptions from the ship came, and Harland guessed that the entire hold must have been packed with the cursed tincture. The Retribution began to slow, and soon stopped in the restless waters of the outer Breath. Harland sighed; although he would still be commended by the Pact, he was hoping for at least some form of plunder. Ahead, the pirate vessel also began to slow, and he could see the sweeps working the ship away from the burning husk. He could hear the muffled cries of the ship's crew, and the sail slackened. The port sweeps began to push the ship while the starboard pulled. The ship began to present her flank, and Harland could see her own forecastle catapult come to bear. The sail went up, and the rudder went hard to starboard as the ship came about. They were coming right for him, he realized, as though they would take the dagger on the prow and run it through his heart.

"Ready on the starboard!" he shouted as the ship came towards them. He saw the first shot from the catapult hurtle towards them, but knew it would fall wide before it had even peaked. The Retribution answered, the resounding crack as metal splintered wood echoing in his ears. The two ships closed, and catapults gave way to scorpions and crossbows when the two ships came up beside each other. He saw two of the pirates fall in the first volley, as one of his own was thrown back with a bolt in the chest and another crumpled with one in the thigh. The Retribution's scorpions hurled bolts the size of pikes toward the other ship, which sheared through the rails on deck but bounced harmlessly off the hull. The Retribution's side also turned away the bolts, but Harland could already see the commands being given as the first of the

grapnels latched onto the ship's side.

"Prepare for boarding!" Harland shouted, easing his dirk out of its sheath. The crew murmured as more ropes were cast over their rail, and he watched the other crew heave, dragging the two ships together. One of his own crew, Klimm, hoisted a grapple and began to spin it, but Harland raised a hand to him. "Let them work for it," he said, and the man smiled as he raised his studded cudgel.

The first man across was a dashing figure in a brilliant white shirt with gleaming boots who made a display of swinging and landing to the stern of the ship. For all his showmanship, once he landed, his cutlass carved a path through the Retribution's crew. His companions began to make their way over to the Retribution as well, if not so gracefully and without as much luck against Harland's own hardened sailors. He saw Umtho bisect a man with his sword as the man swung past him, where Klimm waited until his opponent landed on the rail before bringing his cudgel down on his skull. Another enemy landed nearly sprawling in front of Harland and drew his sword. The sideways blow rang off the basket hilt of Harland's dirk, which he brought around to shatter the nose of the pirate. The sailor stumbled back and made to attack again, but by that time Harland had pierced his heart.

The figure in the white shirt was engaged, holding his own against three of his crew against a backdrop of the deep red fire that consumed the Zephyr. Harland looked closely, and wondered if the man wasn't simply playing with them. A single, loping stroke that took one man in the face, another across the belly, and the third behind the knee confirmed his suspicions.

He grabbed Klimm and Umtho and pulled them back toward the stern. He pointed his dirk at the man, whose white shirt was now sprayed with crimson, and said, "Fast. Do not let up or stop." The man saw them approach and only grinned. He raised his cutlass over his heart and swept away, a salute to Harland as the captain, before raising it behind his head in a striking position. The man had obviously trained with masters, although Harland could not place the style. He and Umtho mounted the port-side stairs to the poop deck as the huge Klimm went up the starboard. They quickly surrounded the enemy fighter, and with a point of his finger, attacked.

Klimm's cudgel rained down on the man, the metal of the studs ringing off of his cutlass. Umtho slashed with his sword, but in a blur the cutlass struck out and opened his arm. Klimm brought the cudgel down, but the man sidestepped and drew the cutlass up and across his chest. Both men backed off, bleeding. When they both advanced again, Harland joined in, thrusting with his dirk, but the cutlass seemingly made a bladed wall around the man, and all their attacks were turned away before they came close to scoring.

Behind them to stern, the merchant vessel's deep crimson flames continued to burn about the deck. Thick black smoke poured into the air. Nothing else moved aboard the ship, except the darting fire. The crew were charred bodies among the burned crates and hollowed-out cabins. An inferno roared out in the direction of the two battling ships, but went only five paces before falling into the sea with a loud hiss. Again it reached out, to no avail. Harland paused as he thought he saw all the flames wink out, and nearly lost his arm as a result. He saw no more fire, but the feeling he got was that of a great serpent of the Deep Sea drawing itself back to strike.

He came to his senses just in time to block the cutlass as it lashed out at his throat. Klimm was bleeding from several places. The way he gnashed his teeth though said that they would not hinder him. Umtho, on the other hand, held his sword in his off-hand while the other arm hung limp at his side. The pirate was spattered in blood, but Harland was sure none of it was his own. They circled him, but he merely flowed from stance to stance in response. Harland

shouted, and they rushed him at once.

Harland had not taken more than a step when the shell of the merchant vessel erupted again, so violently that it threw back the two ships. Grapnel ropes snapped as they bobbed on the waves. Pirate and privateer alike staggered after being hit with the concussive force that spread out across the water. The ships steadied, and the white-clad pirate lashed out once again at Harland's crew. Klimm was taken in the ribs, and grunted as he fell. Umtho rushed the man's back, but the pirate twisted in a moment and opened the man up across the belly. Harland lunged with his dirk. The pirate slashed him in the wrist before the blow even closed on him. Harland withdrew, holding his dirk in a guard position. The pirate smiled as he slithered forward, all teeth and steel, when a second explosion rocked the edge of the Kraken's Breath, sending both combatants to the deck.

The ship was swaying precariously as the pirate struck again. His cut was off-balance, yet still fast, and Harland stumbled to raise the basket hilt to ward it off. Another came, but the ship bobbed on the water, and the slash was uncertain. Harland held his dirk at guard while the pirate circled, and brought his cutlass up to bear. The arcing overhead slash came. A fourth explosion rocked the ocean. The pirate stumbled, the cut continuing at Harland if haphazardly. The ship rocked again to port, throwing Harland just wide of the strike.

Seizing the opportunity, he flipped the catch on his dirk's hilt, and two tines sprung from either side of the blade. He caught the cutlass between the tine and the blade, and a sharp twist of his wrist snapped the weapon a hand's span from the hilt. The pirate looked astonished at his ruined sword, and snarled at Harland's sword-breaker. Backpedaling, the man steadied himself as he removed a dagger from his boot. He was about to remove another when a sound even more alarming than the explosions drew both men's attention.

* * *

A great cracking echoed between the ships as the tine of the Merman's Fork next to the merchant vessel slid off at the waterline and fell into the ocean. The pieces sank quickly through the murky water of the Kraken's Breath, and others followed, the shock of the explosions reverberating through that tine to the base where it met the other two. Silently the great center pillar that comprised the haft of the Fork crumbled away, pieces drifting peacefully down into the depths. At the very bottom, far from the eyes of the humans battling each other above, the last pieces of the Fork settled. There, thrusting out of the sand, an exquisite golden trident toppled onto its side among the stony rubble.

In the cold deep of the Great Blue, eyes opened in the darkness.

* * *

Harland had been cut in half a dozen places, but his dirk had found the other man as many times or more. The two circled each other on the balls of their feet, sharp blades flickering in and out amid the din of the melee on the main deck. Again his dirk raked the man's ribs, and the return cut of the dagger clinked off his hilt. Harland, too slow in returning to guard, paid with a gash across his chest.

He was suddenly aware of an eerie quiet. Stealing a glance at the deck, he saw all the fighters had stopped. He then looked in the direction they one and all were turned, over the bow of the ship. He could only just manage to gasp out the words, "By the spirits. . ."

Off to the southwest, toward the center of what sailors called the Kraken's Breath, blue-black tentacles rose silently out of the water. Up to the sky they stretched, rising above the mast of the ship, then higher than the Fork had stood, finally as high as any watchtower Harland had ever seen at port. He blinked as if it would clear the mirage from his vision, but there they remained, glistening in the light of the setting ocean sun. More than one of the sailors below crumpled to the deck. Behind him, the pirate did not faint, but for the first time seemed at a loss.

Stepping uncertainly up to the rail beside Harland he said, "I thought they were sailor's tales."

"By the spirits," Harland said again, and shook his head. "What have we done?"

"I suggest we ponder elsewhere. Shall we call off this… misunderstanding… and save our ships?"

"If indeed they can be saved," Harland answered. "But agreed."

"Back to the Dagger!" the man shouted. Harland quickly glanced at the ship's hull. Fassaen Dagger. The next time he encountered the ship, he would finish what they had started. The pirates began to scurry on grapnel lines across to their own vessel as his own men watched their retreat in bewilderment. The tentacles continued to reach up, and quivered as if stretching after their long slumber. Harland found himself staring for several long moments before he roused his own crew to action.

"Full sails! Sweeps all forward!" he shouted, and the crew started as he broke their amazed stares as well. On the other ship, the pirate captain was barking orders as his sailors jumped about the deck. Their sail rose up the mast, and the ship began to move for the northeast and the safety of the port of Tobego. The water still churned, and the Dagger rose up and over the waves to land with soft slaps on the water. The lines drew the Retribution's sail up as the Dagger's sweeps hit the water, pushing the ship more strongly up and over the choppy ocean. Harland turned toward the helm to bring the ship about when he noticed the tentacles off in the distance begin to coil and writhe. He thought that some of them began to point in the direction of the ships; as he looked at the pirate vessel bouncing away, he suddenly was sure. "Pull the sweeps! And silence!" he bellowed toward the hold. The crew looked at him with questioning faces, but all stopped pulling lines and stared.

Off their bow, the Dagger was making speed away from the Breath. In a blink the tentacles disappeared into the depths. A white wake made for the Retribution with such terrible speed that Harland staggered back in spite of himself. It passed off their bow, and the tentacles once again burst from the water and fell on the Fassaen Dagger. The ship exploded into splinters, and her crew suddenly found themselves floundering in the water. Harland thought that dark, inky waves rose up to smother each man as the crew fought to stay afloat. The tentacles pounded the water again and again, stirring up white foam flecked with the remains of the pirate sloop.

The Retribution rocked gently on the water, but no one aboard moved or even chanced to breathe. The tentacles soon stopped their furious assault, and once again danced and weaved in the air. Out of the corner of his eye Harland caught the movement of one of his crew ducking into a longboat. When he began to work the pulleys that lowered the boat into the water, Harland bolted for him. "Fool! You'll kill us all!"

The man merely smiled a grin of stained yellow teeth as he drew his dirk and sawed at the ropes. The boat hit the water bow-first, and the deserter began working the oars. Harland reluctantly raised his head to see the tentacles disappear into the water again. Without another

thought he stepped back and threw himself overboard.

The wake darted to the Retribution and the blue-black appendages rained down on the ship. Harland struggled for all he was worth, but the tentacles beating on the water created an undertow that threatened to pull him down. A dark wave rose in front of him—against the current, he thought—and filled his nose and mouth with salty brine. He sputtered, managing to catch one breath before the current caught him.

Underwater, he thrashed and swam, but he continued to move away from the surface. He had all but resigned to a watery death when a sharp pain shot through his back. Fragments of his ship assaulted him, slamming into his limbs and torso on their way to the surface. A large one passed in front of his face; on it the word Retribution was written in gilded, flowing script. He latched on in desperation, ignoring the splintered edges as they pierced his hands. His breath gave out, and reflex drew the first lungful of water into him. His chest felt as though someone had placed an anvil on it, and he closed his eyes.

Then he felt the wind on his face. A contraction sent the water from his chest. He gasped for air, but another wave hit him. The brine taunted him, keeping the precious air from him, but the wave soon washed over him. Twice more he was pounded with waves that seemed to try to force themselves into his throat, but he maintained a death grip on his ship's namesake. After what seemed like an eternity, the water retreated. He sucked sweet, cool air in between fits of coughing and gagging. At last, Harland worked up the courage to open his eyes.

The tentacles were gone. So was the Retribution, save for some small pieces of unrecognizable wood that floated about him. He also noticed that the water was calm, as much so as the water off to the northeast beyond where the Fork had stood. Of course the Breath is gone, he thought ruefully. The Kraken took it with him. With that, Harland was content to float alone in the middle of the Great Blue. The current would bring him into Tobego waters in a day or two.

Until then, he was thankful to the spirits that he was alive.

The End

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

continued from page 16

over the farm. The cloudless sky was a deep red, and an old farmer stared at his unsettled livestock with concern—eight young dragons and four adults that reared, bucked and strained at their chains. Then the farmer saw the Anomaly.

"Get the holocamera," he ordered shakily, and his son immediately rushed into the house to return moments later with a small palmcam. The old man stood quite still while his son aimed the camera.

The air shimmered just a little way from the farm, a rapid rippling effect some ten feet off the ground. The farmer stared at it for some time, and his son made a comment about it being cold. Icy cold, although it was a typically warm summer day. The farmer merely nodded absently.

And then they arrived, the aliens from another dimension, appearing out of nowhere from the center of the icy cold rippling. They seemed to be in the act of running as they broke through and fell heavily to the ground in disarray, one on top of another. Armor clanked and swords clashed. The group was twenty strong, startled and argumentative as they clambered to their feet. Finally they organized themselves and looked around.

Their unified gaze settled on the old farmer and his son. They stared and stared. Several of the aliens made a peculiar gesture with their hands, which thereafter became known to the world as the Sign of Death, for death always followed that strange movement. The farmer, frightened but determined to put on a brave face, raised his hand in greeting and took a tentative step forward.

The aliens let out some kind of war cry and charged. The clank of armor was startlingly loud in the silence of the valley. Swords flashed, and in the next instant, the farmer's head lay in the grass. His body stood quite still for a moment, before toppling forward.

The farmer's son, shocked and terrified, dropped the holocamera and fled. The camera rolled onto its side and continued to film what followed at a skewed angle. The invaders pounced on the boy before he managed to get twenty paces, and they quickly ran him through with their swords.

The aliens, under the watchful eye of the holocamera, broke into the nearby farmhouse and found the farmer's wife. She was dragged screaming from the house and thrown to the ground next to her husband and boy. Her face slackened with shock and disbelief and then twisted into rage as she hurled herself at one of the aliens. She ripped his face to shreds before the others pulled her off. They held her secure while she kicked and screamed.

Then they dealt with her.

* * *

Emmet looked around his messy kitchen.

With the aches and pains of the past week worn off, he could spend a little time cleaning up. There was nothing else to do. He wasn't allowed to leave the house; his factory colleagues were covering his workload during his temporary absence from work, and his company insurance allowed for sick pay for as long as his unfortunate problem persisted. His primary concern was sheer boredom.

But at least he wasn't hurting. And although his toes were pink and sensitive, the soles of his feet were purple and hard, making it comfortable to walk about barefoot on the rough stone flooring.

He peered out the window. It was a beautiful, sunny day: wispy vapor trails drifting lazily in a deep red sky, gently rolling hills across the horizon . . . and a Spy-Eye hovering patiently

high above the house. Emmet sighed wistfully and turned back to face his messy kitchen. He really needed to tidy it. He'd been in no mood before to keep things in order. But now, with a sigh, he set about straightening the kitchen. After that he would work on the living room, and then the bathroom.

By nightfall he felt better. His cottage was neat and tidy, his laundry done, and he had telephoned the Health Department—commonly known as the Office of White Suits—to update them on the physical changes to his body. The person he had spoken to had grunted something about an inspector being around in a couple of days. In the meantime, he had said, "keep taking the pills."

So Emmet took one of the large red pills with a glass of water as usual, and retired for the night.

* * *

By the next morning the swelling in his skull had extended up over the top of his head in a knobby, crested ridge running from front to back. The budding horns had become more defined, now an inch long. His hands and feet had elongated, and his fingernails had become long and curled. It was a dramatic and speedy change.

He checked his body for further change. The purple blotching to his shoulders had deepened and spread and was now hardening. The hair on his chest was dropping out. His calf muscles were more defined, rippling with muscle, almost popping out of the pale skin that held them in place. And his heels were becoming pointed, the soft, round fleshy parts being replaced with hardened points.

Emmet considered phoning Jake again, but decided against it. Despite his mumbled apology, deep down he hadn't yet forgiven his best friend for passing on the disease to him. Jake had, after all, known he had caught it—and yet had paid a visit to Emmet anyway, his self-denial getting in the way of plain old common sense. So Emmet had caught the disease and here he was, confined to his home with the Health Department's Spy-Eye hovering outside.

He flipped on the holovision. It was already mid-morning, as he tended to sleep in these days. By the time he got through watching a movie it was lunchtime. Another half-hour or so was killed preparing and eating his lunch—a large, softly roasted rat, which seemed to taste better than it had a few days ago, when he'd first cooked it. Evidently, his taste was undergoing change too—or perhaps his sense of what constituted good food.

He took to staring out the window at the world. His cottage stood in the middle of a valley, alone but for a few friendly neighboring cottages and farms, none of which were anywhere in sight. He would have to walk up and over the grassy hill to see his nearest neighbor, Edgar. Like the murdered farmer in the holoreel, Edgar was a dragon breeder whose livestock grazed in the meadows.

How Emmet wished he could sit out on the porch and drink a few beers in the company of Edgar, exchanging views on the world as they often did. But alas, Emmet was confined to his home, self-quarantined in accordance with the law, the Spy-Eye's powerful laser weapon a constant reminder against popping outside even for a moment.

He sighed and turned away from the window. Suddenly, he winced, feeling a painful twinge in his forehead. It throbbed for a short while, and then faded away. Emmet felt around his head, pulling away a clump of loose hair. He stared at it in silence for a moment, before he threw the clump in the waste paper basket and went to the bathroom to look at himself in the

mirror.

The purple shade that had started on his shoulders now crept up his neck and around his ears. His forehead and knobby, crested ridge had also been touched by the discoloration. He gingerly touched the point of one of his horns and winced.

Late afternoon he spent channel hopping, trying to find documentaries about the invasion. He'd seen most of them, but he watched them again anyway. Being a victim of the alien contagion put a new slant on his perspective of the invaders. He now realized why they wore so much armor and lofted such heavy weaponry; stripped of their manufactured garments and instruments of death, they were weak and delicate creatures, easily bruised and cut. But despite their poor natural defenses, they were tenacious. The twenty-strong group of aliens that had emerged from the Anomaly had cut their way through nearby townsfolk with fearless brutality, slashing and chopping at anyone who stood in their way. They seemed to enjoy it, if the cackling noises they made could be interpreted as laughter.

As he turned in that night, his mind was saturated with visions of aliens. He popped another pill in his mouth and grimaced with distaste as it went down. It took him a while to drop off, but when he did, he dreamed of the invaders from another dimension and of the disease that followed.

* * *

When Emmet awoke, it was still very early—around five in the morning. The sun hadn't risen yet, and he lay in bed wondering if he would drop off again. It didn't seem likely; his mind was filled with aliens.

He touched his head in the darkness and was startled at how long the horns had grown in such a short span of time. But he was pleased they no longer hurt.

He became aware of loose hair lying across his pillow and, feeling around, scooped up as much as he could and deposited it onto his bedside table. He still had a few tufts left in his head by the feel of it. Reaching out, he switched on the bedside lamp, looking down at himself.

The change was even more dramatic than he would have thought possible. The purple discoloration now covered his entire body, and his skin—particularly around his shoulders and head—was becoming scaly. Some of the tenderness had disappeared, which was good, and the hardened scales around his shoulders were taking on a glossy sheen. Emmet's hands were nearly twice as long as they had been two days ago, and each of his fingers was developing an extra joint. A knobby ridge had begun on the backs of his hands, continuing up past his wrists to his forearms, where the knobs became more pronounced.

Emmet rushed to the bathroom and gripped the edge of the sink, his heart hammering. He stared at his reflection.

His face protruded impressively. A tough, scaly, reptilian brow, bare of eyebrows, overhung a chiseled, streamlined face with a slender jaw and chin. His nose had flattened and his nostrils flared. His eyes were yellow. His ears sprouted upwards, the cartilage of a few days ago now toughened into solid bone. Light-purple scales spread over them like a rash. He no longer had to stand on tiptoe to properly view his head and shoulders in the mirror, and when he dressed, he found that he no longer had to turn up his trousers at the hems. He was growing, and fast; at least six inches in height overnight, due mostly to his elongated calves and pointed heels that turned his feet up onto tiptoes.

Emmet phoned Jake, even though it was still very early. "It's happening so fast!" he said

breathlessly. “I know it’s supposed to be like this, but . . . It’s such an amazing change, so fast…” He listened as Jake explained, and realization dawned. “The pills. They speed things up! I thought they were just to ease the pain. Well, that explains a lot.”

He put the phone down and went to the window, staring out across the valley. The sun was creeping over the horizon.

Sighing and tingling with excitement mixed with impatience, Emmet flipped on the holovision. He searched six hundred or so channels for more documentaries about the invasion. He came across a new show, which showed the usual footage, but with the addition of a new piece, an uncut clip he’d not seen before, showing the last alien to be put down.

As a prelude, the regular footage of the grassy hill holopicture and the senseless slaughtering was shown. It was this footage that drove home the unrelenting brutality of the aliens and caused the Governors of the land to summon a small army of dragonriders. They swept down from the red sky and burned the aliens alive.

The news teams had kept watch on the proceedings from the air, capturing on camera the aliens’ strange Sign of Death—hands moving in unison across their faces and chests. They performed the gesture right up until their bodies were scorched beyond recognition.

But in the rarely seen footage, one alien, partially shielded from the scorching by the bodies of his colleagues, writhed feebly in the grass.

A few of the dragon riders dismounted and cautiously approached the alien, standing over it. Eventually, and with obvious distaste, they hoisted it roughly to its feet and supported it by the arms. Its clothing had largely been burned away, and its armor, now blackened, seemed to have fused with the alien’s flesh. It had been moaning in pain; now it screamed, its tongue bright red and teeth startlingly white against the charred, peeling flesh of its face.

The dragon riders finally let the alien go and it slumped to its knees, moaning. There was a long moment where the alien seemed unaware of being watched, but finally it lifted its head and looked around. Its eyes were large and bright. As the dragon riders moved in to put an end to the last alien’s life, it knew what was coming and wailed terribly, performing the strange Sign of Death, one of its hands moving from its forehead to its chest in the familiar, but bizarre, four-point pattern. Then it began to shout a single word, over and over, pointing at each of the dragon riders in turn until its throat was torn out.

The rest of the day passed slowly for Emmet. The last word of the alien rang in his ears. It made no sense to him, of course, but it was a simple word and easy to repeat. He absently muttered it to himself all afternoon and into the evening.

He took his pill as usual, and read a book until he managed to drop off.

* * *

He awoke feeling completely different.

He crawled out from under the covers and sat on the side of the bed. His long, clawed toes scrabbled on the stone floor. That was a sound he hadn’t heard in a while. He studied his scaly, bare legs: long, sinuous and powerful, his calf muscles flexing with an urge to spring him into the air. A vast improvement over the pale, weak, hairy legs of late. His attention turned to his hands and arms: again, long and sinuous, scaly, knobbed ridges up his forearms. Emmet was pleased—and he felt great.

He wandered into the bathroom, finding his way in the darkness easily with his improved vision, and looked in the mirror with yellow, startlingly bright eyes. His long, streamlined jaw,

flat nose, flared ears, and striking knobby ridge sweeping back over his head cut a strong and foreboding figure. All the dark brown hair had gone and his bald, scaly head shone under the faint glow of the lamp above the mirror.

Emmet eased open his mouth and saw sharpened fangs and a forked tongue. He gave a whoop and punched the air.

Jubilant, Emmet pranced around the house. He felt great, better than he'd felt in a long time. He sprung five feet into the air, grabbing hold of the iron exercise bar on the ceiling that he'd installed a few years back. After twenty effortless chin-ups he dropped back to the floor, his powerful legs absorbing the impact with ease. He felt so strong.

At almost ten, a vehicle pulled up in his driveway—a sound he had not heard in over a month. It had to be one of the White Suits. He almost yanked the door open in his eagerness to see another person again, but remembered the procedure—and the all-watching Spy-Eye—and waited patiently instead. He peered through the small glass pane in the door and watched a figure climb clumsily out of the car, cumbersome in a white, protective suit that left only the eyes visible behind a small, plastic shield.

The visitor from the Health Department approached and knocked on the door. "Open up, Emmet."

That, according to standard procedure, was his proper and legal authorization to open the door while under self-quarantine conditions, and he did so with gusto. He stood grinning broadly at the visitor and waved him inside.

The visitor stared for a while. "I'm from the Health Department," he said unnecessarily. "Largo's the name. You look well. A little, uh, off-color though. Open your mouth and say 'ah' for me." Emmet did so while Mr. Largo poked in a small flashlight and studied the back of his throat. "Hmm," he muttered, non-committal. He moved the flashlight to Emmet's eyes. "Hmm," he muttered again. "How's your vision?"

"Fine," Emmet said. "And I feel great!"

Mr. Largo studied him for a while, looking him up and down. "Well, I wouldn't say you're, uh, in peak physical condition, but . . ."

Emmet waited, holding his breath.

Finally, the man in white sighed. "I'll guess you'll do."

Emmet whooped for joy and danced around the room. "At last! You have no idea what it's like being cooped up in here for a month, on my own. Ever since I caught the disease, I've been laid up in bed with headaches and back pains and . . . and . . ." He stopped and looked at the visitor. "Have you ever seen that footage, the last alien to die?"

"Yes, so?"

"Well," Emmet went on, "I was wondering, since you're part of the Governor's Office and all—do you know what *'devil'* means?"

"Excuse me?"

"That's what the alien was shouting before it was put to death. It was pointing at the dragon riders and saying *'devil'* over and over. I know it's an alien word, but . . . do you know what it means?"

The man in white shook his head and unzipped his mask. "It's just gibberish. Why do you ask?"

Emmet sighed. "I don't know. It's just . . . I was wondering what the aliens thought about us. Did they hate us? Were they afraid of us?"

The man in the suit removed his mask, and his yellow eyes glinted at Emmet. He pulled

off his gloves and held up a long, scaly finger. “All I know, my friend, is that a lot more damage has been done *since* their deaths than during their rampage. I mean, how were we to know they carried disease? They *were* disease. A virulent, biological disease of the like never before seen in our world.”

“Did you ever find out how it spread? Why it affected us?”

Mr. Largo shrugged. “Through the ashes? Carried in the wind? We’ll never know how it started, Emmet, but once it took hold and mutated, becoming an airborne contagion . . . We lost many decent people at first—infected, turned into *them*. We had to . . . put them down.” He absently scratched his flat nose with a claw. “But not to worry. The disease is under control now. The pills not only reverse the process, but they work quicker than ever.”

Mr. Largo cleared his throat and cocked his head, curious. “So, Emmet . . . how did it feel to be, um, an *ape* for a few weeks?”

Emmet grimaced. “Horrible.”

The End

Keith Robinson is an Englishman living in Georgia with his wife and three cats. As a self-employed website designer by day and a sci-fi, fantasy & horror writer by night, he spends far too much time on the computer. “Contagion” is his first published story.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

continued from page 21

was quiet, almost kind. Almost the voice Arthur remembered, and loved.

"The first part of my destiny has been completed, Arthur. You stand here before me, the embodiment of Light. It is time now, at last, to complete the final part. My father waits beyond the veil, has been waiting so very long. It is past time I welcomed him home."

And so it came to pass that amid the thirteen greatest treasures in the world, in a legendary castle at the heart of a legendary island, Emperor and Sorcerer did battle for the first and last time.

* * *

Earth was never meant to be a haven of Light. Claimed long ago by others, harbingers of Darkness, demons as old as time and space, Earth was to have been a shadow world, a place of eternal torment and hatred. Then the golden ones came, argent-winged Angels singing songs of glory and wielding swords of Light, and the forces of the Dark were driven back, thrust beyond the veil that separated the universes and forgotten.

But the harbingers did not forget. For years, eons uncounted, they languished beyond the universe they had sought to poison, watched as the Earth grew strong and rich, and fulfilled its promise of life. And as they watched, their hatred grew. Their hatred of the Light. And such was their hatred that the greatest among them wove their greatest spells; that one among them might be chosen to pierce the veil, to carry in darkest secrecy, the seed of their salvation.

So it was that the agent of Eternal Night pierced the boundary between universes and came to Earth on the wings of a summer night in the guise of a dream. And because the agent was corruption, because perversion was its nature, it sought and found a woman, a princess, of surpassing purity and goodness. Tainted at the last by a thing of ultimate evil.

But what the agent of the Night did not know, could not have realized, was that like Darkness, Light too, might corrupt, if it is bright enough and strong enough.

And in the soul of Princess Gwynnedd, the Light burned fiercely indeed.

* * *

It was to be the staff first. How many times, in how many battles had Arthur watched the old man wield that staff only to marvel over and again at its might? How many times had Arthur thanked God that the old man and his staff were on his side, battling beneath Arthur's own banner?

No. He had to stop. Those thoughts and memories would kill him here.

Almost did, as in rapid, blinding succession, Arthur took the first blow on his shield, the second on his sword and was forced to duck the third. The fourth caught him high on the right shoulder, between the plates of his mail where his flowing mantle was clasped. Only the weighty chain beneath kept his arm from going numb.

The Emperor staggered back and absently reached for his shoulder. Even without his magic, the old man was deadly. Arthur had always known that.

But Arthur had battled side by side with Launcelot du Lac, had sparred with him and learned from him. And no man, ever, had been Launcelot's match.

Slowly, his eyes never leaving the sorcerer's, Arthur circled the old man.

"Come now, Arthur. You are young, yet, and I am very old. Would you have this dance end so quickly?"

Three quick steps and the sorcerer closed, his oaken staff whirling and spinning and thrusting.

Was countered and absorbed and turned away by *Caladfwlch* in a master's hand.

The wizard stopped and laughed. "Ah, better. Du Lac taught you well. As I knew he would. Well enough?"

The old man was a hurricane of force. Again and again his legendary staff rose and fell. And each time it did, *Caladfwlch* was there. After blocking a deadly overhead strike, Arthur spun, feinted left and cut down and to the right.

The old man parried effortlessly, answered with a lightning quick thrust to Arthur's knees followed by an upper cut thrust at his chin.

Both blows were turned, absorbed by sword and shield. Arthur responded with two adder-quick thrusts of his own.

Both blunted by the staff.

Warily they circled, each looking for an opening, a weakness to exploit. But there were no weaknesses, not here, among the ancient, watching stone of this hidden place; not with the stakes what they were. Here, they were a match.

"You think us a match Arthur?"

Arthur's eyes narrowed as he continued to circle.

"You are wrong."

When the staff began to glow, Arthur knew the battle, at last, had begun.

* * *

Princess Gwynnedd had died during Myrrdin Emrys's fourth year. She had passed away in her sleep. Slain, some said, by the nightmares that had plagued her for years.

When Myrrdin's grandfather, King Demetius, told him of his mother's death, Myrrdin had not been surprised. His mother, Myrrdin told his grandfather, was not the only one who dreamed. Myrrdin was sent away then to the woods. To the old man Blaise.

He never saw his grandfather again.

Demetius burdened Blaise with the task of teaching the king's young grandson the ways of God. To this end did Blaise strive. It was Blaise the Holy who taught young Myrrdin, so clever, so bright, the Lord's own prayer. It was Blaise the Wise who taught young Myrrdin to read and write.

And it was Blaise the Sorcerer, who, on a winter's night, after hearing the four year old Myrrdin recount the impossible tale of Joseph of Arimaethea and his Grail, taught young Myrrdin the ways of magic. For Blaise divined the truth. The ancient prophecies had long spoken of 'He Who Was To Come,' of he who was to be the greatest of Enchanters. Of he, born of two worlds, the Darkness and the Light, who would save the world; or destroy it.

Blaise knew Myrrdin, knew the fine – so terribly fine – line, the child would tread. So much darkness in his young heart, and such bright, brilliant light. A Doom unlike any other. How could any man reconcile such a fate? Blaise was not certain. What he did know was that he would do all in his power to aid the child. In the name of Demetius and Gwynnedd, in the name of Light and the World, Blaise the Holy would teach young Myrrdin to hate the Dark, would teach him to love God and His great goodness.

And had it not been for the dreams, Blaise might even have succeeded.

* * *

The staff was a sliver of night, filled with stars and blackness. It radiated cold and an un-light that hurt the eyes to look upon. Arthur remembered the story of the staff, *Nuadhu*, fashioned from a branch of the tree where Judas had swung, thirty pieces of silver scattered on the ground beneath his cold, swaying feet. Three times had the branch been struck by lightning, thrice tempered by the Hand of God to purge the stain, the taint to the traitor's blood. The old man had sought the staff for years before finding it at last in the tomb of Gregory of Nazianzos, known as St. Vasil the Great. Arthur knew well that it was among the mightiest artifacts in the world.

But in his hand was *Caladfwlch* the Mighty, *Caladfwlch* the Invincible, and no sword, no weapon, had ever been its equal.

The old man surged forward and the staff struck like an avalanche, driving Arthur back and down to a knee. A terrible, fell wind filled the chamber then as sword and staff embraced, truly, for the first time in a shower of black stars. For a moment, Arthur held the staff along his blade. Then, with a mighty effort he stood, driving forward and up and sending the old man back. On his feet again, *Caladfwlch* at the ready, Arthur stared at the staff. Not a mark was there upon it, and not a bead of sweat glistened on the old man's brow. The Sorcerer seemed stronger than he had been, stronger than Arthur had ever seen him.

The wizard laughed, the sound more hurtful than any blow could ever be.

"Oh, Arthur, my mighty Arthur. I have chosen well in you."

A tool. It was all Arthur had ever been. The realization was poison in his veins. Didn't the old man know how much Arthur loved him? Couldn't he see that? Couldn't he see, even now, what this battle was doing to him? Arthur stared at the man who had been . . . everything to him. Yes. Yes, he could see. The old man just didn't care. But it was more than that. Arthur knew the old man relished the pain this battle was causing him, reveled in it, counted on it. The *Ymerawdwr* shook his head, and steeled himself.

"Indeed," Arthur whispered quietly. "You have."

Again the old man brought the fight to Arthur. This time three savage, blindingly quick strikes that Arthur absorbed upon *Caladfwlch*.

Followed by a fourth, an elegantly simple palm thrust, that caught Arthur below the chin. For an instant only, surely no longer, the *Ymerawdwr* of the Britons was staggered.

It was too long. The sideways stroke of the staff that followed the blow was not blocked, not this time. Arthur cried out in pain as *Nuadhu* caught him in the ribs and sent him hurtling through the air where he landed in a heap of mail and chain and blood.

* * *

For years, in strictest secrecy, Blaise had tutored Myrrdin in the forbidden arts. By the age of seven, Myrrdin could assume the shape of any animal in the forest. By nine, with a glance, he could tame and command the most ferocious of beasts. By the age of twelve, his power far outstripped Blaise's own, and even the forest itself, the trees and grass and roots, would heed Myrrdin's commands. In his sixteenth year, he seized, for the first time control over the elements: wind and rain, fire and earth. And in his twentieth year, Myrrdin commanded his first spirit, a hunter, slain by a bear near Blaise's home.

And though Myrrdin grew in wisdom and power each day he remained in Blaise's care,

two things, always, remained: First and foremost there was, had always been, the dreams. When still a boy, Myrrdin would talk of the dreams, would ask Blaise about them. Why did the voices want him? Why did they call to him? Who was he that these voices should need his help? And what did they want him to do?

Blaise fought with the dreams, and knew them for what they truly were, the voices of the Dark. "Do not listen to them," he urged. "They are the many voices of Satan. Turn from them, Myrrdin, look to God to save you. Pray, and God shall chase them from their shadows."

Myrrdin listened to his master. For years he fought the dreams with all the power of his mighty will. Time and again he refused to listen to them, time and again he prayed to God to deliver him from their beckoning grasp.

But God seemed not to hear, and the voices did not go away, though Myrrdin's talk of them did. The dreams became his secret, his only secret from his friend and master. And as Myrrdin listened to them, came slowly to understand them, Blaise's words, his guidance and wisdom, grew more and more distant.

Prophecy was the other thing that remained with him, dreams and prophecy. But where the dreams whispered their words with his father's cold, distant voice, the visions that came to him sang in the bright, perfect voice of his mother. The visions were gifts, answers to the darkness of the dreams. In his visions, Myrrdin saw a perfect land, a golden land, where justice and peace would reign and the mightiest of warriors would gather.

And he saw a young boy who would grow to be *Ymerawdwr* of that land, and the greatest champion of Light.

Like his dreams, the visions too Myrrdin came to understand. And with that understanding came a thought: perhaps, just perhaps, God did care after all.

Dreams and prophecy. Darkness and Light. A Doom unlike any other.

In his twenty-second year, soul-torn, his heart a battlefield of brilliance and shadow, Myrrdin went mad. For thirteen years, hidden among the sacred trees of Celyddon, Myrrdin toiled in madness's grip. And when at last the madness passed, his destiny, for the first time in all his life, finally became clear. Somewhere in the world, he knew, a child waited to be born, a golden child, a child of prophecy. It was Myrrdin's destiny to raise that child, whose name the world would know as Arthur, and make of him a champion of Light. At Arthur's feet he would lay a perfect kingdom, and a perfect love, he would lay the perfect soldiers and the perfect Law. All this would he do for Arthur in his mother's name, in the name of Light.

Then in the name of Darkness, in his father's name, Myrrdin would destroy it all; Arthur and Camelot, love and the world. For this too, was his destiny.

* * *

Summer stars swam before the *Ymerawdwr's* eyes, bright flashes of white that made it difficult to think. He drew a breath to steady himself and stifled a cry as his side exploded in pain. He remembered the attack, replayed it slowly in his mind's eye. He had attempted to roll with the strike, to lessen its horrific impact. Evidently, he had succeeded, for he knew beyond doubt that had he been even the least bit slower, the blow would surely have killed him. All because of a palm strike. Du Lac would have laughed. *"In battle, even the simplest of attacks can prove deadly."* Under a bright sun, with the sounds of a stream trickling past, Launcelot had spoken those words. At the memory, a new pain swelled to life inside Arthur from a seemingly endless wellspring of suffering. Those days, those years, they had been golden, perfect. Images

and faces flashed before the mind of the *Ymerawdwr*: Bedivere and Tristram, Palomedes and Gawain, the Table, the Boar and the Beast. Cavall. Then new images: death and carnage, friends killed and broken. Modred. Then finally the blood-slick fields of Camlann and a battle that changed the world forever. Arthur closed his eyes. Too swiftly those golden days had passed. Too swiftly by far. But not in vain had they come. He would not allow them to have been in vain.

"Unfortunate," the old man said, his voice almost sad as he made his way across the chamber. "I had somehow expected more."

Arthur ground his teeth against his pain and rolled away from the wall that had so abruptly ended his headlong flight. He shook his head, wiped the blood that flowed freely from his cracked lip, and stared at the old man.

Then at *Caladfwlch*, so very far away.

Though he couldn't recall it, he must have lost his grip on the blade when he slammed against the wall. As he tried to rise, Arthur realized that something was terribly wrong with his shoulder. An attempted breath and he doubled over in pain upon the ground. Once again memory flashed: a different summer day. A sparring match. Du Lac, impossibly, on the ground before him. Arthur laughing, reveling in his glorious triumph, closing in for the kill. Launcelot, waiting . . .

"And so death comes to you at last, Arthur," the Sorcerer said as he approached. Arthur watched him come, *Nuadhu,* gleaming jet in his hand.

"Who would have thought, I wonder, that your death would come by my hand? Certainly none of the fools in your service. Guinevere perhaps? Perhaps . . . A clever girl that one. Had she not been so clever, perhaps things would have turned out . . . differently between you. Such an old story, betrayal."

Arthur's eyes slitted as understanding came. And with it, anger. Terrible, frightful anger. Anger that *almost* made him forget, almost made him act too early.

"You understand at last then. It is good. Such a simple thing really. A feast, a potion with some wine. And a betrayal that would echo through eternity."

The old man was close now, Arthur could feel the chill radiate from the staff. One more time Du Lac's face flashed across his mind, and he watched the greatest of his knights wait. Just a moment longer.

"Ah, Arthur. While as an executioner you have proven sorely inept, you have played the part of the Fool meticulously. Goodnight, sweet Arthur."

And when the old man raised his staff to end once and for all the *Ymerawdwr's* life, Arthur struck. Clutching a handful of dust and rock, he hurled it into the face of the triumphant Sorcerer.

The old man cried out, much like he himself had cried out on the practice field so many years ago, his own triumph spoiled. The Sorcerer recoiled, more shocked than pained. As he did, the Emperor launched himself forward.

"Arthur," the old man said, wiping the dust from his wizened face, "that trick was beneath you."

"Perhaps," Arthur said quietly, standing unbowed before the old man, *Caladfwlch* once again at the ready. "But this is why you made me. This is why I am here. And in the name of the love you have destroyed and the Light I have served, I tell you: I will not fail."

Then Arthur pushed aside his pain, and with all the strength and courage of his bright, bright soul, he attacked.

The Emperor was relentless. Again and again he wove the intricate pattern of swordplay. Parry, thrust, roll, lunge, strike. Again and again. It was a beautiful thing, brilliant and scintillant. Mercilessly, Arthur drove the old man back, the old man who had always and ever been so much more than mortal. *Caladfwlch* was alive in his hand, a living glory. Again and again it struck *Nuadhu*, but no longer did the sacred oak remain unscarred.

The upward stroke that finally shattered the ancient staff had been preceded by a wondrous feint and a perfect roll. At the staff's rending, a sound like the cracking of the world shook the chamber.

The Sorcerer stumbled back.

Arthur, too, was thrown backward. He landed hard, the breath driven from his lungs by the impact, but kept hold of his sword. Stifling a groan, the *Ymerawdwr* gained a knee, and drew slow, heaving breaths. His hands on *Caladfwlch* trembled, and the sweat that streaked his face stung his eyes. Across the chamber, he watched the old man rise.

"That," the Sorcerer said into the silence, "was well done."

Then despair settled in the pit of Arthur's stomach as the old man's eyes glowed incarnadine.

"But the time for games has ended, Arthur. I've a new era, a new world to usher in. A dark world. My father's world."

For a moment, Myrrdin held out his hands, gathered his power. Arthur planted his feet and raised his sword. An instant later, a searing splash of crimson might exploded in the *Ymerawdwr's* direction. Arthur turned his head and screamed. The torrent of malignant power inundated him and filled the chamber like a river. But, if Myrrdin's power was a river, *Caladfwlch* was an immoveable stone at its heart. Arcane power flowed on either side of the legendary Lord like twin streams of malice. But, though *Caladfwlch* was invincible, Arthur was still a man. And though his feet held firm, still was Arthur driven back, slowly, inexorably. In his grasp, *Caladfwlch* began to shudder as his mortal, muscle-taut arms grew weary. At the heart of the maelstrom, the *Ymerawdwr* ground his teeth until he tasted blood. No. It must not end like this. This was his reason for being, the justification for all he was and all he had accomplished. Over the scream of unleashed magic, Arthur cried out, "I'll not fall! Though you crack the earth and split the sky, though this island fall to the ocean's bottom, I'll not yield. Do you hear me, old man; I'll not yield!"

At once the torrent was ended. Bereft suddenly of an opposing force, Arthur staggered forward. A quick glance at his hands showed savage burns through the mesh of his gauntlets. His injured shoulder hung low and he crouched for the pain in his side. But still was *Caladfwlch* high, still was he *Ymerawdwr* and warrior.

The old man stared at him and slowly shook his head.

"Oh, Arthur, my dear Arthur. Look at you. What a warrior you have become! Du Lac would be so proud. Long shall your praises be sung by those who are themselves legends. Your name will live long after the Light has set. It shall be my gift to you, Arthur. Even the Dark shall know your name. It shall be my final gift."

A wind began to blow then, in that secret chamber at the heart of that secret castle. An ill wind. In a moment it was a gale, and then it was stronger still. Cold and bitter, the wind clawed at Arthur's mantle, sought to flay the mail from his armor, the skin from his flesh. Raising an arm, Arthur fought to keep his balance, fought for breath, struggled mightily one step at a time toward the Sorcerer.

Who floated now, spirit-like, above the ground. Through the dust and rock that

threatened to blind him, Arthur could see the old man's hands. In his left, a bolt of lightning nestled, its power seeping and slipping between his gnarled fingers. In his right, a ball of flickering, scalding flame. Arthur knew the end had come at last. He glanced at the Treasures and knew one chance only was left to him. In his heart he prayed to God that he would be given enough time.

Then somewhere beyond the island, beyond the world, thunder pealed and the flame was on its way.

* * *

All came to pass just as Myrrdin had foreseen. In time, Arthur was born and under Myrrdin's guidance grew to be the greatest king in the world had ever known. Camelot was raised and waxed supreme in all the world. The Round Table was fashioned and about it the greatest knights in the world gathered in the name of Light. Guided once again by Myrrdin, Arthur recovered the sword, *Caladfwlch*, from the Lady of the Lake. Myrrdin would need that sword, once Arthur was dead. The witch beneath the waves had known this. Had known too, that *Caladfwlch* was the only thing that might stop what was to come.

As Arthur grew in power and wisdom, Myrrdin was seen less and less. With Arthur established, with his reign secure, Myrrdin was free at last to set about his task of raising the Dark.

And so in secrecy, the mighty sorcerer set about gathering the Thirteen Treasures of Britain: *Drynwyn*, the sword of Rhydderch Hael, which burst into flame, destroying any save the righteous who held it; the Basket of Gwyddno Long-Shank, the Horn of Bran, and the Chariot of Morgan; the Halter of Clyddno Eiddyn, which summoned the best of horses; the Knife of Lawfrodded, and the Cauldron of Tyrnog, which would cook any meal, but only for the just; the Whetstone of Tudal Tudglyd, the Coat of Padarn, and the Crock and Dish of Rhygenyd; the Golden Chessboard of Gwendolau, whose silver men played by themselves; and the Mantle of Arthur, won by the Emperor in fair combat, which made the wearer invisible. This last, Myrrdin had obtained by telling Arthur that the Mantle's powers were evil, that the Mantle had been granted its power by Satan. Arthur quickly spurned the garment and bade Myrrdin destroy it.

So easy, all of it, so very, very easy. The Treasures were, had always and ever been, the heart, the essence of Britain. Born of the Land itself, they *were* magic, their power unmatched in all the world.

And when they were brought together, when their sacred powers were joined with *Caladfwlch*, even the veil between the universes could not stand against them.

Myrrdin's task complete, the Treasures his, he had vanished from the world. But just before he did, he spoke one final time. To Modred. One more word, whispered in a secret hall in Loth, and a hatred that would live in legends was born. A hatred that would carry Arthur to the battlefield of Camlann and that would carry Arthur, in the end, beyond the world of men.

To a hidden island that no living man could find, where Emperor and Sorcerer, Darkness and Light, might meet at last. As they had always been meant.

* * *

Arthur dove, twisting his body as he did to avoid landing on his injured shoulder. The ball of flame exploded, obliterating the ground on which he had been standing. Pain seared across

his ribs, caused his vision to dim. "Move, damn you," he muttered to himself. "Move." With a grunt, he was on his feet in time to see the second flaming sphere rocket toward him. One more leap, one more twist, one more narrow miss and he was close enough. Gathered beside him in one place, the Thirteen Treasures of Britain thrummed with wild, peerless magic.

Arthur stared at the Treasures. He knew he could not beat the old man; not fairly. Had always known. The old man was too strong, stronger, perhaps, than any man before him. But he did not have to fight fair. He only had to win.

"You've no place left to run, Arthur," the old man said over the howling, blinding wind.

Trapped between the back of the chamber wall and the Treasures, Arthur knew the old man spoke true.

"It is enough," the Sorcerer said, "what you have done. No man could have done more. You were my answer to the Dark, Arthur. And a glorious answer you were. Will you believe me if I say I loved you, once?"

Arthur's knees buckled to hear the words he longed so desperately to hear. Yes, he did believe him. And in some small way that he did not fully understand, it made what he had to do next easier. This, right here, right now, was the reason he had been born, the reason the old man made him what he was. Arthur would not disappoint him.

"Even now, on the very verge of realizing my destiny, a small part of me is saddened at the thought of killing you. But that part of me no longer matters, and in the end, even you could not win, not here, in this place where Darkness, true and everlasting, shall be reborn. Can you not see that it is enough?"

Arthur drew a slow, painful breath. It was difficult to see any distance, so thick was the dust of smashed rubble that blew through the chamber. The Emperor closed his eyes and over the onrushing gale he cried, "I see old man, at last I see." Then he stooped low, and placed *Caladfwlch* upon the ground at his feet.

For a long moment, the only sound in the chamber was the rush and roar of the wind. Then the wizard laughed. "Ah, Arthur. One last ploy? What game do you play at?"

The wind began to let up then, but beside Arthur the stone floor still burned. Despite the terrible heat and acrid smoke of the arcane flames, the *Ymerawdwr* found the old man's gaze, held it and measured it.

In his Lord's heart, found it wanting.

"No," said the old man, "this is not the way it was to end." Lightning danced and crackled, searing the air between the Sorcerer's hands. "But, it matters little how it ends. Only that it does. A single spell cast through *Caladfwlch* into the assembled Treasures, and the veil shall be pierced at last. I've no time for your games, Arthur, whatever they may be. Like your time and your life, your destiny has reached its end."

The old man released the lightning. The sizzling bolt stretched forth, a blinding, obliterating nest of blue-white asps; straight for Arthur's heart.

* * *

Many long seconds passed before the smoke cleared and the dust settled and the old man could see again. He floated gently to the ground. Beneath his feet, the earth still trembled faintly. Calmly, quietly, he strode forward. Where Arthur had been, only a smoldering crater remained. And at the crater's edge, covered in dust and broken rock, lay *Caladfwlch*.

The old man, eyes narrowed, head cocked, said nothing. Intently, he listened for the

faintest sound, sought for the faintest shift in the gloom.

He waited. For long moments, he waited. Once more he scanned the chamber, scanned the dust-shrouded Treasures, and counted Thirteen. Everything was as it should be.

And no Arthur. What had he been playing at? What game? The old man knew well enough that Arthur was no coward. Had any man, ever, been as brave? Had Arthur's plan gone awry? Had he miscalculated? Possible. The spell was a powerful one, among his most potent. Arthur may well have underestimated its strength.

One more careful glance about the darkling chamber. The fires were sputtering now, failing, their crackle-pop the only sound that disturbed the chamber's unearthly silence. With a wave, the old man extinguished them. He listened, strove to hear . . . what? A breath? A shifting in the silence?

He heard nothing. He saw nothing. The Treasures remained. And *Caladfwlch*, mighty, invincible *Caladfwlch*, lay at his feet. The old man wondered if, along with the shattered, broken rock of the chamber, it was Arthur's ashes that obscured the length of the legendary sword.

"Farewell, Arthur," the old man said. "Farewell."

Then the old man stooped, reached down.

Grasped *Caladfwlch*.

And burned.

* * *

The Sorcerer's cry was terrible, harrowing. Unleashed from someplace deep inside, it was a breaking sound, the sound of a soul being rent. A tower of roaring, hungry flame, the screaming Sorcerer staggered, the sword slipping from his grasp.

The Sword of Rhydderch Hael. The Sword *Drynwyn* that burned and destroyed the unjust.

His screaming at an end, the old man collapsed, all but consumed by the Treasure's unassailable curse.

"I am sorry, old friend," Arthur said at last, drawing back the hood of the Mantle of Invisibility that had once been his. "Truly."

Arthur watched the old man on the ground before him, watched him raise his head one final time, and watched him reach out a single, flaming hand.

Then Myrrdin Emrys, called Merlin, died, consumed in the end by the flames of righteousness, at the feet of the saviour, *his* saviour, of the Light.

Arthur fell to his knees and bowed his head. In the silence of his grief-stricken heart, he prayed for his friend, prayed that the soul of the man he had known all his life was stronger than the soul of this stranger who lay before him. When he was finished, he struggled to his feet. The battle over, his wounds and aches screamed their pain at him. Arthur refused to listen. Instead, he reached down and lifted mighty *Drynwyn*. Then the *Ymerawdwr* turned to the Treasures. Enough power to change the world.

Or save it.

For a moment, Arthur stared down at the blade that had destroyed his friend. Its beauty was appalling, and its power no less so. Such a thing was never meant to be controlled. None of the Treasures were. Not even by the most powerful sorcerer the world had ever known. Arthur drew a slow breath, and then limped over to where the Treasures rested. With reverence, he replaced *Drynwyn,* and picked up *Caladfwlch* which he had put in its place. A necessary

deception. The old man was too cautious. Arthur knew he would look to the Treasures. He'd only hoped the sorcerer wouldn't look too closely. He hadn't.

After replacing the sword, the Mantle too, he replaced, taking back his own tattered purple cloak. In the aftermath of his casting, amid the blinding dust and burning flames, Myrddin had not seen him switch weapons, had not seen him don the Mantle. Arthur had been granted his time after all. The *Ymerawdwr* shook his head. He had won a great victory this day, a great victory for the Light. But as he stared at the blackened remains of the Sorcerer who had raised him, had made him all that he was, he knew it was a victory he would never rejoice in.

Stumbling, exhausted, Arthur made his way back to the Sorcerer's smoldering form. His charred bones were to remain there, on Ynys Enlli, a warning to any who might come after. Such was the fate of his friend.

But he would not remain in the dark.

Nor would he remain alone.

Carefully, Arthur draped the remains of his purple Emperor's mantle over the old man's blackened form. Then, with the last of his strength, Arthur Pendragon, *Ymerawdwr* of the Britons, carried his oldest friend and mentor, Merlin, up and out of the dark of the chamber; into the light.

It was the Emperor's final gift.

The End

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards